

薬屋

ひとりごと

Kusuriya no Hitorigoto 3

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日向夏
illustration
しのとうこ

Kusuriya no Hitorigoto

– The Pharmacist's Monologue –

- Volume 3 - Imperial Court 2

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[Fantasy-Books]

CHAPTER 1

MASTER

Together with the door sliding open, the person who entered the room gave a big sigh.

“Welcome back.”

Gaoshun slowly inclined his head. He regarded the young man who seemed to be wearing a costume. Slumped shoulders, a downtrodden face, and bangs that had grown to cover his expression.

Gaoshun closed the door. There were people outside who had followed as adjutant on behalf of Gaoshun.

The same time the door closed with a click, the young man with the wretched appearance smoothly set back his shoulders. He brushed his hair aside, revealing a beautiful face.

He had applied some makeup to alter his face, but it was still surprising that he was able to change that much.

A beautiful young man, Jinshi was there.

No, this wasn't the man called Jinshi.

He looks like a completely different person, Gaoshun reminded himself.

They were not in the building they usually used – it was several times more superior. The people who could enter were extremely restricted.

Even Gaoshun made sure he entered via the rear entrance. His robes weren't the official robes he usually wore – it was something a little more refined.

“Shall I prepare for your bath?”

“Yeah, I'll leave it to you.”

Gaoshun implored his master who wasn't in his usual robes.

Up until some time ago, his master was with the emperor and several high officials.

His master loosened the collar of the robes he wasn't accustomed to wearing, and reclined onto the couch. Suiren, the middle-aged court lady, presented some chilled fruit juice to her listless master.

He got the manservant to prepare the bath. The man had served them from a long time ago, someone like Suiren who had known the master since he was young. With this man included, the number of people here could be counted on one hand. Even though he had him fill-up the hot water, it should take a little while.

"As expected, it was an issue I cannot avoid."

His master wasn't asking Gaoshun. Gaoshun didn't offer a reply, knowing that he could only be speaking to himself.

It was on the evil practices. Of the inner palace that has become overly enormous.

The inner palace of the previous emperor had exceeded five thousand court ladies. The current one had not even half of that. Since the numbers continued to drop year after year.

Despite that, half of what there is now would be much more reasonable. Even less would be fine. Even the emperor agreed.

There was a certain girl who was said to have met with court lady hunters, but that was all bad timing. The court lady replacement was implemented at the same period as Consort Riishu's marriage.

It was good that the current era is peaceful. No locust damage nor large famine for these last couple of decades. Once in awhile, foreign tribes would make passes at them, but those were nothing like a rebellion.

Maintaining the garden of women was capable of clearing out the national treasury at times. However, this could also be due to the employment counter-measure. It was ironic that needy peasants would choose to work in the flower garden.

It was under the pretext of that employment that the prime minister chanted to not scale down the numbers in the inner palace anymore.

The middle-aged man, who was well-regarded by the previous empress dowager, was the one behind the pointlessly expanded inner palace.

It was he who suggested increasing the number of consorts who could give birth if the previous emperor could not produce children, and thus proceeded with the yearly increase of court ladies.

Though the cause of the previous emperor being unable to beget offspring was due to something entirely different – not wanting to reveal that was repulsive.

Meaning, the previous emperor was no more than one who was only inclined towards young girls.

Was it not the case, would he do something like generously bestow the girl said to be the country's most beautiful maiden?

Besides that, it wasn't rare for him to liberally bestow consorts to his retainers.

As such, when the current emperor's younger brother was born, it was to the extent that no one doubted the empress dowager's infidelity.

That there was no way the emperor would crook his finger to the empress he raised.

The prime minister, who grew plump from drinking the nectar of the previous era, probably also believed the current era to be his too.

To using considerably overbearing methods to get his daughter to marry.

To the point of driving out Consort Ah Duo.

There are still ways to deal with him if he just grew plump, but it was difficult to be an opponent who has already reached the point of a raccoon spirit.¹

"I ought to do something about it huh."

His master muttered. Gaoshun waited, keeping silent.

Even if he didn't want to, he ought to do something. That was his master's job.

When he saw the change of clothes that Suiren brought over, his master headed towards the bathroom.

The emperor was also doing the unreasonable.

To force unreasonable demands to a nineteen-year-old youth.

That he had to accomplish it.

He had no other choice than to accompany his master if that was the road his master chose to take.

That was what Gaoshun thought, once again.



When Gaoshun deigned to go to the Jade Palace, the short, unsociable court lady was absent.

“Where did she go?”

He asked Honnyan the head maid. With an indescribable expression, she pointed to a building a fair distance away.

He saw smoke, as if there was fire being used.

What could it be? Just as Gaoshun was going to head to that place.

Today he came to relay directives; Jinshi wasn’t around. Even though he came for just that, the maid who was firmly gripping the grass sickle looked this way.

Maybe I’ll do it later, Gaoshun had to use needless tact. Once, there seemed to be a time when she entrusted the grass cutting to a eunuch, he worked on the design of the window. If he considered that she had faith that Gaoshun won’t do that if it was him, he should feel glad.

Promising he would do it later, Gaoshun headed towards the place where he could see smoke.



In the kitchen of the building where the smoke was coming from, there was a short court lady watching the pot.

The inside of the room was stuffy with heat and the scent of flowers.

“What are you up to?”

“Gaoshun-sama.”

The forehead of the expressionless Maomao was covered in a light sheen of sweat.

There was a strange pipe that extended from the pot on the stove. Liquid dripped from the end.

It appears the source of the smell was from there.

“I’m making rose water.”

I see now, so the fragrance was because of that.

That saying, the rose pots were transplanted into the inner palace after the garden party.

She must be using their petals.

At any rate, the girl was doing something bizarre.

Moreover, it was poor of her that she didn’t realise that.

She sniffed the liquid that was steadily dripping from the pipe, and scowled, *I guess it’s good enough*. It appears that she wasn’t satisfied with just this degree of fragrance.

She also prepared dye used to differentiate the scents she already made a lot of.

“You properly got Consort Gyokuyou’s permission, didn’t you.”

“It was harder to get Honnyan-sama’s permission. I also must tidy up completely. She said I have to completely get rid of the smell from my body.”

A small amount of the oil of concentrated plants shouldn’t be a problem, but it seems that if you use too much, it would be bad for pregnant women.

That’s why she said she went out of her way to borrow a different place and do it there.

I see, more than the consort who likes interesting things, it was the head maid who was enthusiastic about work who was stricter.

And yet, that she was able to get her permission in itself; is she aware how lenient of her she is, this girl?

Her type was one who loses sight of her surroundings once she is concentrated on something.

Even though she conducts herself calmly for other things.

Maomao poured the rose water into a small bottle and handed it to Gaoshun.

The concentrated fragrance spread through his sinus.

“Wild roses have stronger scents though.”

Maomao made a somewhat displeased expression.
It really was a researcher’s trait to pursue perfection.

There was large pot set on another stove.
There was a ceramic pipe that extended out of it in a similar way, dripping clear liquid.
It was different to the rose fragrance. This smell made his head spin.

“That one is to collect alcohol.”

I see, it makes you feel drunk just by sniffing it.
Nevertheless, he cannot help noticing that everything she does goes over the domain of a pharmacist.
It is possible to say – though he would certainly incur her displeasure – that she really has a lot of parts that resembled the Tactician. The blood of an eccentric is an eccentric

Maomao collected the accumulated liquid into a bowl and efficiently tidied up.
When Gaoshun also went to help, he was told that, *You’re diligent as usual huh.*
What can he do? It could be because he has a wife that was older than him – it seems that his body ended up moving first for this kind of things. Him being okay with being entrusted with weeding and wiping the windows was because of that. Because he had a terrifying wife, he would get shouted at every time he returned home.

Suddenly, a boorish thought went through Gaoshun’s head.
Well, if it’s Maomao she wouldn’t mind if he spoke of it, so he decided to ask her.

“Shaomao, have you ever thought of about marrying?”

She was eighteen-years-old, already approaching the latter half of marriageable age.
It was because the inner palace was a special circumstance, it kept slipping from his mind, but her age was already one where parents would pester her about it.

“I’m interested in giving birth, but I have no thoughts about marrying.”

Her answer was quite a jump.
If that’s the case, does she mean that she wants children?

“However, since I’m not positive that I am interested in children, I can’t just recklessly get seed.”

Was she meaning that she was interested in the act of childbirth itself?
His head was going to hurt.

“Please don’t carry it out.”

“I won’t do it until I can hold responsibility. Besides, my body is a mass of poison, I’ll need to start off by getting rid of the poison first.”

No, even if I give birth like that, no that can’t do. Maomao considered something absurd.

Sooner or later, is it. It was same as an experiment, already said before love or affection.

He didn’t know whether he should protest properly by that time.

While he extinguished the stove fire, Gaoshun scratched the back of his head.
He was interested in a completely troublesome person.

T/N: Another possible meaning for the title is “husband”. Also, note that all the characters in this story are a year younger by Western standards (they’re using the Kazoe system).

1. 化け狸, Bakedanuki, Japanese Raccoon-dog spirit, a shapeshifting trickster-type spirit, similar to a fox. While foxes shapeshift to tempt, raccoons do it to fool people. They are all depicted with bulging bellies.

CHAPTER 2

HERALD

“Is that true?”

It was three days after the Spring Party when Jinshi turned up at the Jade Palace speaking of suspicious things.

Maomao was looking at Jinshi, although she was doubtful of what he said. They were in the parlour of the Jade Palace. Consort Gyokuyou was in the middle of changing clothes, so it will take some time for her to come.

“Yeah, I’m unsure if I should say it though.”

Jinshi said, scratching the back of his head.

A criminal died on the night of the Spring Party. No, correctly, it was the man who was deemed as the criminal.

Ironically, the younger brother, who tried to poison his brother the other day by disguising it as fugu poisoning, had died from poisoning during imprisonment.

“It didn’t seem like there was that sort of situation when Gaoshun came over yesterday.”

Maomao glanced over to the taciturn eunuch who was standing against the wall. Gaoshun slowly nodded as if he was affirming.

“I also heard about it yesterday evening.”

With a complicated expression, Jinshi cast his eyes down.

Maomao, seeing that, considered the reason for the time lag.

Jinshi’s position should be the inner palace administrator. Considering that, it was obvious the handling of that case was originally out of his field. If she considered that, it wouldn’t be strange if he heard about it later too.

On the other hand, she felt that he was making a displeased face for that obvious thing.

Still, she understood if it was just Gaoshun. He did say he did a similar kind of work before, and his friend from the looks of it should have solved the incident.

Why is Jinshi frowning? Maomao thought.

“Is that so? Are the other prisoners also poisoned?”

It was Gaoshun who refuted Maomao’s question. He was shaking his head.

“No, the prisoners were provided two meals a day, but there didn’t seem to have anything strange in it.”

“Then what could it be?”

The one who replied next was Jinshi.

“The criminal was also treated to a meagre meal after the party.”

It seems with that meal, so to preserve the form of giving leftovers, there was no way they would provide the same things as everyone else. Not just that, it seems it was also common to add in something that is sent in a form of gift. Originally, doing that was prohibited, but since everyone had wine after the party, it became customary for the jailers to close their eyes too.

(I see huh.)

If that was the case, it would be late for Jinshi and them to hear about it. So to speak, since it was an internal mistake, they must have wanted to keep it under wraps.

“And then, do they know what poison was it?”

“That’s the thing.

Jinshi put his hands in his sleeves and groaned.

Maomao wanted to ask for more details, but since the faint sound of footsteps was closing in, she slipped over to stand before the door.

Standing quietly on the side of the door, Maomao lowered her head.

She felt the door open with a clunk. Consort Gyokuyou who had finished changing walked in.

“Did you all talk about anything fun?”

The beautiful red-haired consort sent mutual gazes towards Maomao and Jishin. It was like curiosity was about to fly out from her eyes.

“No no, we were just chatting.”

Jinshi was overly prepared, sending an almost uncanny smile towards Consort Gyokuyou. It was ineffective to the consort, as expected, but Honnyan who was affected by the spill-over looked like she was going to stumble, though she somehow recovered with the willpower of a head maid.

Maomao looked at him with an icy gaze – she can’t help thinking sometimes that Jinshi was some kind of *ayakashi*¹. The head maid was able to resist, but the three maidens who were watching from behind her were destroyed.

(He’s an *ayakashi* no matter how I see him.)

While she was thinking about that, before she knew it, she was facing Jinshi with a dangerous look. Gaoshun glanced at Maomao, and for some reason, Jinshi was looking this way with a look of delight.

(The usual turn of events huh.)

As she was thinking, Maomao quietly exited the room.



After Jinshi and the others went back, Honnyan told the maids to bring out the summer clothes. She felt it was still a little early in the season, but considering the quantity, it would be better to be early.

“There are quite a lot of old-fashioned designs huh.”

Infu was breathing wildly when she stood dauntingly before the dressing room. Guien

was looking after the princess, so it was decided that the three – Infa, Maomao and Airan – would go out.

Airan seemed to mind, but since she had stature, it was convenient that it was easy for her to reach for the trunks that were high up.

Maomao and Infa, who had no stature, took the trunks from Airan and verified the contents.

“I guess, this one still could work.”

Infa separated the clothes into usable and unusable groups as she looked at them one by one. They all looked like high-class articles to Maomao, but it seems that Infa who had a discerning eye could tell the difference.

“This one, was extremely popular one time. Once the popularity passes, it’s useless since you can’t just use it anymore.”

Maomao crammed the unusable clothes that had been sorted back into the trunk, and carried it out to the corridor.

Even old clothes were something the consorts had used. They said that since the materials were fine, they were to be remade and then bestowed. Those weren’t given to the maids of the Jade Palace, but were sent to their families.

The maids do receive ornaments like *kanzashi*, but in the case of clothes, since they weren’t clothes that you wear grandly inside the inner palace, it is sent around to the hands of workers, and delivered to Gyokuyou’s father’s territory in a different form.

“That saying, in a little while, new maids might be coming in.”

Airan, as if she just remembered, said as she brought down the trunks.

“There should be more people if Gyokuyou-sama’s pregnancy is known. But, just that will arouse suspicion, so they said that for this period all the consorts are given the chance to increase their numbers of maids.”

Hearing that, Infa’s mouth gaped open.

"I'm happy for that, but that's too sudden."

"There seems to be a reason. I mean, one consort had over fifty servants when she entered court. The other consort, you know."

"Ahh, you mean that."

Infa's face darkened at that moment.

Maomao also understood who they were talking about.

(She even had fifty huh.)

It certainly looked like a large family, but I didn't know it was like that, Maomao thought.

In regards to that, if the emperor's favoured consort had only five maids with her, it would look bad.

"Have they made no effort in decreasing that?"

"Infa, if you say that, you'll get crushed by Honnyan-sama again."

Airan said. *Oh no*, Infa held her mouth.

Maomao focused on bringing the unused articles in the trunks outside.

While they were chatting as they worked like that, about half of the summer clothes remained.

"We only have this little left. What should we do?"

Maomao also tilted her head when she asked. Airan laughed, saying, "It's alright."

"We already requested the workers for several sets of clothes."

"The caravans are coming soon. We'll buy more then."

Infa continued. Catching the remark, Airan made a slightly sulky face.

"Caravans, you say?"

Once again, there seems to be an event that the court ladies of the inner palace are delighted with, Maomao thought as she carried the summer wear to dry them in the

shade.

1. あやかし, this is used both as a general term for supernatural beings, as well as a specific kind of spirit that is found on the surface of water that lures unsuspecting peoples away. I translated it as 'apparition' before, but I supposed that didn't carry the same connotations for it.

CHAPTER 3

CARAVANS

The inner palace was large. Way larger than a run-of-the-mill town.

The court ladies who are there exist to simply serve the consorts, to maintain the buildings of the inner palace, and – at an equal nil chance – to become the emperor's chosen.

Due to this special environment, their lifestyle differed to living normally in the town. The court ladies' duties are allotted between cleaning, washing and cooking. It might be correct to think it as akin to living together in as one gigantic family, more so than a town.

Due to that, such a large place was supposedly ideal, but it wasn't like that at all. That is—.

"Looks really fun."

"Really?"

Maomao returned a question mark to what the court lady who still retained some childishness, Shaoran, said.

At the square, court ladies were walking gleefully in front of the tents. There were several large tents lined up, but as the court ladies of the inner palace numbered two thousand people, there wasn't room for low-ranked court ladies to get in, so while they couldn't even look at the goods, they could only watch the high ranked court ladies who look like they were enjoying themselves.

The low-ranked court ladies – Maomao and Shaoran too – were watching from the balcony of their rooms. Since the high ranked court ladies, with the consorts included, were in high spirits, they were working while doing nothing at all.

"How nice. I want new clothes."

With her chin on the railing, Shaoran said while pouting.

“You won’t be able to wear it anywhere.”

“I still want it!”

Low ranked court ladies are only provided three sets of work clothes in the summer and two in the winter as a standard. They are only provided with replacements in the case it becomes very worn out. Additionally, hair cord and underwear, daily necessities are all provisional items.

Meals were daily. They didn’t need to make it themselves since they were provided in the dining hall.

Court ladies who were slightly wellborn receive packages along with letters from their family.

The maids of consorts are bestowed clothes and accessories from their consort, and snacks too.

Shops. That was what the inner palace didn’t have.

Shaoran, who had no backing whatsoever, only had the clothes on her back. With the way things are now, it was rare for her to have the chance to increase her personal belongings, assuming she even does. She could only look for whatever things she could attain out of her own pocket after other court ladies had rummaged through and bought their own things.

There were no usual shops at the inner palace. It feels somewhat strange.

(There’s only the quack doctor for doctors too. There’s not even a pharmacist either.)

And yet, if they contract some disease in such a large family, it seems like it’ll end up spreading.

The hygiene management was reliable. A large ratio of the court ladies’ jobs comprise of cleaning, and on top of that, they deal with a lot of garbage disposal. They use the water in the moat, and the garbage flows down there. Like that, the moat would start to start to smell, but since it was designed so the water wouldn’t stop flowing, the smell doesn’t build-up.

It seems to a piece of architecture introduced from the West that makes use of the water supply technology, built during the time of the previous emperor.

If the hygiene aspect was done properly, just that would prevent against most disease outbreaks. Court ladies who get severely ill don't need to wait for their term of service and are able to leave the inner palace.

(Even so, they're kinda cheated.)

Maomao thought as she absentmindedly watched the court ladies who were having fun shopping.



When she returned to the Jade Palace, she was met with court ladies with content faces.

While Maomao was slacking, no, working while doing nothing, it seems the merchants have come to the palace. Rather than the high-ranked consorts going out of their own way to walk to the tents, the merchants have directly turned up to their places.

Perhaps they were setting foot into the inner palace, all the merchants were women. Even so, considering the worst case, there were more eunuchs posted as guards.

“The emperor said to pick what you like.”

Infa said like she was talking about herself. She placed a necklace the same beautiful colour as Consort Gyokuyou's eyes on the table. She also placed glass cups and a box decorated with mother-of-pearl as well.

The tottering Princess Rinrii looked extremely delighted with a beautiful silk ball in hand. Aside from the consort's clothes, small clothes for the princess were hung up along the wall.

“Didn't you splurge a little too much?”

Consort Gyokuyou tilted her small head.

“No. Buying more would have been fine too.”

The head maid Honnyan said a little excitedly.

“The others must have bought more.”

Honnyan spoke in a reserved way, but Maomao could readily imagine that.

At the Crystal Palace, Consort Rifa’s maids who were only skilled with talk must have shopped in style. Consort Rifa’s bosom/pocket was large somehow or other, so their shopping was a given.

At the Diamond Palace, Consort Riishu would be made to buy even things she likes with a bit of flattery.

As for the Pomegranate Palace, Consort Rouran liked showiness to that degree. It goes without saying.

Thinking that, Maomao thought that Consort Gyokuyou who finished shopping what could fit in one room, although she was the favoured consort, she was very economical.

The consorts have a ‘duty’ that the consort receive their respective wages from, but that is taken away as necessary expenses in the inner palace as clothes they wear and their supplies.

Consorts, high-rank, middle-rank, low-rank included, make not even a hundred. *Would the national treasury be okay?* It was Maomao who ended up needlessly worried.

“For now, new places will come tomorrow too, so we’ll put away today’s share.”

Since Honnyan was rapidly taking down the clothes on the wall, Maomao went to take those. All of them felt nice, and the dyes were beautiful.

(Oh?)

Maomao suddenly realised. She noticed the style of the clothes were different to what Consort Gyokuyou usually liked to wear. The consort liked to match a sleeveless long skirt with a large-sleeved outer garment, but this time there were a lot of outfits with tight sleeves and a hem that is fastened with a sash directly under the chest.

Not like she didn't know the reason. It is around the time where outfits, where you tie the sash at the abdomen, would get tight for Consort Gyokuyou.

"...Were there any other types aside from these outfits?"

"Eh? We were told these were popular."

There were only just these, the maids faced each other doubtfully.

The maids of the Jade Palace purchased the clothes after thinking about Consort Gyokuyou. But normally, wouldn't they choose a more different design?

Basing on that, if it happens that these clothes were what the merchants brought over.

Maomao could be over thinking.

(I want to believe that I'm overthinking.)

That they purposely brought over this sort of clothes for Consort Gyokuyou to select. She had a very unpleasant premonition concerning that thought.

And so, Maomao's premonition was right on the mark.

CHAPTER 4

ESSENTIAL OIL

The caravans stayed for around three days. During that period of time, the court ladies enjoyed the shopping they normally couldn't do.

High-rank consorts weren't required to step out, so the ones who first went around the tents, purchasing what they liked, were the middle-ranked consorts, low-ranked consorts, their maids, and then the court ladies who held posts.

Court ladies with low positions could only look at the unsold items on the last day, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves, so she understood how low was the amusement of this place.

The caravans that turned up this time had come by crossing over the desert route, so they had many curious goods from the foreign countries. It seemed they also passed through Consort Gyokuyou's hometown; the maids of the Jade Palaces saw her touch the crafts nostalgically.

More than those things, Maomao wanted to see the kinds of medicines. But of course, those things cannot be brought into the inner palace, so they could only sell tea leaves and spices as freebies.

Since she received some spending money from Consort Gyokuyou, Maomao went together with Shaoran on the third day.

Shaoran was only going to look without getting anything, but her eyes shone as she gazed at the glasswork from the West.

Maomao bought a hair cord of a pretty colour, and stealthily tied it onto Shaoran's hair. Shaoran, who had noticed it when she looked in the mirror by chance, suddenly hugged her until she felt like they were going to fall.

Maomao bought tea leaves and spices. The maids of the Jade Palace went on the second day in alternation, but she held back till the third day.

This was the reason.

(They should be selling it for cheaper on the third day.)

What Maomao wanted wasn't fashionable clothes nor gemstones. It wasn't like everyone would buy all the tea leaves and spices that came as a freebie with the clothes. From the start, this was the unique place called the inner palace, it is unlikely that the goods would be sold at reasonable prices.

(Don't think you can easily rip people off.)

This was the being known as Maomao.

It was for this exact reason that Maomao obtained a discount for the unusual tea leaves and spices.

The tea leaves were jasmine tea – a craft tea where flower buds are submerged in the tea. Perhaps it was because it remained unsold, they sold it to her for a very cheap price.

I profited huh, Maomao thought, but afterwards, she noticed a certain thing. *I can't get excited*, she decided to reconsider it after.



Perfume oil was the fad of the inner palace after the caravans left.

The smell of various flowers wafted over wherever she passed through. A single perfume product smelt very nice, but when you have so many people wearing different kinds of perfumes altogether, it was slightly wearisome for Maomao who had a good sense of smell.

The perfumes were not faint like incense. It was characteristic of perfumes imported from the West to be so strong.

It didn't seem like Maomao was the only one affected. When she went to the washing area, the oil coated clothes had piled up, and the washing duty eunuch was filling up the tub with water with his face scrunched up.

Fads always come in waves.

Since the manicure fad had died down considerably, everyone had jumped onto the

new thing.

And there are also a lot of people who are only trying it out for the heck of it, without knowing whether it was a good thing or not.

It was okay it that was fun, but Maomao, who never jumped into the craze till the end, settled by saying that it really wasn't her sort of thing.

Maomao set down the laundry basket wearily. She felt she was going to get dizzy from the smell just by being here.

The moment she stood up listlessly, a maidservant who was carrying a basket of laundry bumped into her like she was in the way. The laundry fell atop Maomao's head.

"I'm so sorry!"

The shrill-voiced maidservant gathered up the clothes.

The owner of these clothes seemed well attuned to fads as well – a heavy smell of roses were ingrained into it.

(Roses huh.)

Maomao, who thought that she might be able to make a profit if she widely sold the rose water she made the other day, wouldn't be good.

In truth, she only made the rose water the other day because she could. She was going to preserve it without using it, since she heard that rose oil had a bad effect on pregnant women.

She thought it wouldn't be a problem if Consort Gyokuyou doesn't use a large amount, but since she didn't know what could happen, she had to be careful.

For that reason, before it goes off, she had intended for the chance to sell it at the prostitution quarter.

Mmm, Maomao grabbed hold of the laundry, blinking incessantly. She brought it closer to her nose. And sniffed it.

Upon seeing that, the maidservant fell into a fluster.

Maomao ignored the maidservant who was acting up and tossed the laundry into the overflowing basket. It wasn't like she buried her face in the washing.

This time, it wasn't just the maidservant. The eunuch who was close by and the other maidservant also widened their eyes. But that had nothing to do with her.

Maomao repeatedly went bury her face into each of the laundry baskets, and then headed for the next basket.

And once she was mostly done with sniffing, she headed to a certain place, forgetting to bring back her washing basket.

The place where *fads* can get even more overboard. Maomao knew very well.

That day at the Crystal Palace, the screams of the maids resounded throughout the inner palace.



When she thought that he will probably come, in the evening of that day, the beautiful eunuch turned up at the Jade Palace just as she thought.

There was a written protest that seemed to be an anonymous letter in his hand.

"I thought you were a person with a little more restraint."

Jinshi's amazed expression was tinged with a hint of anger.

Behind him was Gaoshun who was oozing hardship in his amazed expression, a troubled Consort Gyokuyou who couldn't be still in her excitement, and Honnyan who somehow veiled her expression of carnage behind a thin mask. The other maids were sleeping together for Princess Rinrii's bedtime.

(Mhm, that's right.)

Maomao thought. But she was too late.

In order to change assumption into conviction, she required a lot of proof. For that,

the Crystal Palace had just what she needed – you could say that Maomao had simply lost to her curiosity.

“Pardon me. I got so excited that I forgot about asking for their consent.”

“What’s with that perverted old man excuse?”

I’d rather you don’t call me an actual pervert, Maomao thought while she reflected for now with her head bowed.

“I properly get their consent next time I sniff.”

“Why the hell were you sniffing!”

Your speech is rough. “Oh my,” Consort Gyokuyou blinked incessantly.

Not good. Jinshi seemed to think, returning his slightly raised eyes back to their usual tender expression.

Maomao reflected for now.

She reflected on forcibly sniffing without getting the other party’s agreement. She also had to reflect on the point where she got a little excited and nearly half-stripped them. Also that she picked the maids of the Crystal Palace for being the other party.

Due to that, she had a feeling that she had ranked up to being treated as something even worse, from being the demon or monster she was until now.

I still needed to check, Maomao thought.

(I’ll reflect on this much huh.)

Maomao looked up and stared at Jinshi. She had to think that his coming over immediately due to the protest was good news.

Maomao thought she needed to make a quick decision.

“There’s a reason for that, regardless.”

Several seconds passed with Jinshi just staring at her.

Still expressionless, he then moved his mouth.

“The reason for the reflection?”

“That goes without saying.”

Maomao declared simply.

CHAPTER 5

JASMINE

Maomao carefully started to write characters on the paper. This was paper she received from Consort Gyokuyou. Honestly speaking, it was too high quality.

(The back of some scrap paper would have been fine.)

Thinking of such things, only Maomao was destined for poverty here.

Everyone crowded around Maomao who was sitting at the desk. They looked at the things she listed down.

“Rose, benzoin, phoenix tree¹, frankincense and cinnamon? Um, are these all perfume oils or something?”

Maomao nodded at Consort Gyokuyou’s response.

“These are only the names of the spices and oils I know the court ladies are wearing today.”

“What about them?”

Jinshi, his hands tucked in his sleeves, tilted his head.

Maomao stopped writing and placed the brush on the ink stone.

“Yes, though they were in minuscule amounts, all of them cause harm to pregnant women.”

Everyone was silenced at Maomao’s words.

Also, Maomao continued.

“Aside from perfume oil, they also sold spices and tea leaves.”

Maomao took out the tea and spices she bought. The tea was jasmine, and the spices were mustard that was like Maomao who was fond of drinking, slightly expensive pepper, rock salt, and cinnamon that was also used as a spice.

“Jasmine contracts the womb. I think it’s fine in small doses, but it’s better you don’t drink it to avoid the possibility of miscarriage.”

Maomao placed the flower shaped craft tea on the table.

“And then, spices. Mustard is an ingredient that is often used by streetwalkers as an abortion drug.”

Maomao glanced at Consort Gyokuyou. The consort nodded, “Continue,” with a serious expression as if she was thinking that this isn’t the time to joke. Beside her was Honnyan who didn’t want Consort Gyokuyou to hear such an ominous conversation, but she seemed to respect Consort Gyokuyou’s opinion and kept silent.

“In other words, you mean that using these will increase the chances of miscarriage?”

Maomao made a vague expression at Jinshi’s question. That was a hit, and a miss.

“All just increase the possibility. They’re not certainly effective. As long as you don’t make a mistake, and do things like drink the perfumed oil, or intake a large volume of it.”

All these goods usually have no problems if you use them normally. That’s why they were brought into the inner palace. And also, you can change how you use the products however it suits you.

In that case, it might be that someone could make some kind of mistake and end up drinking it. And, if it happens that it was unexpectedly a pregnant consort.

Even if the design where the sash won’t be tied tightly was recommended as fashion, it would have better if it was noticed earlier, Maomao thought.

“Shall we investigate the visiting merchants?”

“We can investigate them, but I doubt they would have recorded the goods in detail.”

It seemed they differentiated incense as incense, spices as spices, and tea leaves as tea leaves. They wouldn't go as far as to record the varieties of each of those. Even so, since she thought the position of management on inspecting all the goods were assigned thoroughly, she had a feeling that they won't be able to say anything.

Maomao was caught up in yet another thing.

"Doesn't this remind you of *that*?"

"What do you mean, *that*?"

Jinshi responded to Maomao's vague words.

The thing that was brazenly given out as a product in the inner palace, but had an unknown side effect.

"The poisonous face powder."

Maomao said, and everyone started.

It was the summer of last year. When Princess Rinrii got sick from an illness of an unknown cause. At the same time, Rifa's child who was the crown prince also fell sick and then passed away.

The face powder currently being used isn't made with lead, and that cannot come into the inner palace.

To say it conversely, they might think that something else would be fine.

"So you're saying, your opinion is that there are people who especially tried to get poison into the inner palace."

Jinshi said to make sure.

Maomao neither shook her head nor did she nod.

This was an assumption, she wasn't positive. Although it was fairly close, she couldn't completely brush off the possibility that it wasn't so.

"While I was here, I only knew that there are a lot of things sold that can be poisonous. A single product isn't handled as poisonous goods."

It was an unfair way of speaking. She didn't like implicating the visiting merchants with her words. That's why she only stated her opinion, and then entrusted the higher-ups for the judgement.

"I think it's better to just warn the other consorts."

She could only say that.



After the talk was over, Maomao was suddenly tired.

She recalled her dad's words.

You cannot speak of things with speculation, the old man who was like an old woman's voice replayed.

How much of what Maomao said was speculation, and how much was conviction?

She felt slightly unwell from thinking that.

Maomao entered the kitchen and boiled some water. Even though the water was boiled, she got it to cool down a bit. She added water to the glass cup with jasmine. It was an expensive glass cup, but she'll clean it properly afterwards so she'll use it for a little bit.

The flowers came apart in the hot water, the buds opening up. She watched from the side while sitting on a chair in a daze. The aroma rose about her.

"Wasn't that poison?"

She heard a beautiful voice from above.

When she looked up, there was yet a beautiful face. It was already pitch black outside, only a single lantern lit up the kitchen.

The face that was lit up by the flickering red light was truly a hateful beauty.

"Poisons in small quantities are also medicine. Above all, it's not like one cup of tea will result in something. This is the kitchen. It's not a place for Jinshi-sama to enter."

“Don’t speak about the minor details.”

“How is Gaoshun-sama?”

“He went to send a message.”

Maomao gave a small pout at the haughty eunuch.

Maomao carried the completely unfurled tea to look at it under the lantern. While enjoying the flowers drifting back and forth in the water, she took a sip of tea.

“Besides, it’s not like I’m pregnant.”

“That’s true.”

Jinshi turned away for some reason. Before she realised, he was sitting diagonally across Maomao.

“Can I have some tea as well?”

Jinshi said as he looked at the drifting flowers in the glass cup.

“What tea would you like?”

Maomao stood up from the chair, while thinking, *This rascal is such a pain*. Teas for the guests were lined up on the shelf. To be on the safe side, would a white tea be fine?

Jinshi stared at the glass cup.

“The same thing as this would be good.”

Maomao lowered her brows at Jinshi’s words.

“That’s the last of that tea.”

Maomao looked at the pot that was left close to the kitchen. The tea leaves were thrown away as rubbish in the pot, so what she was drinking now was all that was left, and the rest were all thrown away.

(Even though I took the trouble to buy something nice.)

And yet, as long as she was in the place known as the inner palace, as long as she was serving Consort Gyokuyou, she thought she had to draw a line.
And so, she had wanted to enjoy this once.

“What other effects does this tea have?”

“It’s calming. Effective for insomnia as well as keeping you awake. Other than that, while it’s not good when you’re pregnant, I’ve heard that it’s good in the case of childbirth.”

“There are more positive effects.”

“Yes, that’s exactly why I missed the side effects.”

I got something really good, Maomao thought.

Did a lot come in exclusively for this time, or did they come in as a product like before?
Maomao had no idea.

When the previous caravans came, Maomao was working at Jinshi’s room, nursing Consort Rifa at the Crystal Palace, and before she became Consort Gyokuyou’s attendant maid, she had no money so she had absolutely no interest in things she couldn’t buy.

This time, if the perfume oil didn’t become a fad, it was highly possible that even Maomao wouldn’t have noticed it.

However she looked at it, it was truly only a good product.

“White tea should be fine.”

“ ... ”

Jinshi looked unhappy, but it couldn’t be helped with what she didn’t have.

Maomao relit the kettle and added tea leaves into the teapot. Lukewarm water should be fine, she took off the kettle just before it boiled and let the tea leaves steep slowly in the pot.

She poured it into a teacup, and set it in front of Jinshi.
Jinshi picked up the teacup unhappily.

Maomao showed him the flower tea that was rocking in the glass cup like she was showing off.

“Besides that, there is also a better effect.”

“What kind?”

“Infertility. Mainly for men.”

“...”

A teary gaze pierced through Maomao.

(This is bad.)

I overdid the sarcasm, Maomao thought. As a bit of cold sweat erupted down her spine, Maomao went to look for sweets to humour him.

When she thought she heard the sound of tea being daringly slurped,

“I’m leaving.”

Saying that, Jinshi quickly left.

As Maomao pursed her lips,

(I’ve done it–)

She thought.

When she was helplessly going to put away his teacup, the white tea she brewed for Jinshi remained untouched.

Instead.

The jasmine tea that should still have about half remaining was completely drained.

Maomao sighed with an amazed expression.

1. 青桐, Aogiri, *Firmiana platanifolia*. Also known as Parasol tree. This incense seems to only be used in the East, so have some info. The tree the oil is derived from is called the phoenix tree because legends say that this is the only tree that phoenixes like to perch on. Apparently, leaves are used as an incense. The oil is extracted from the seeds. There's caffeine in the seeds. (I couldn't find much info on this as an incense, but it does have a lot of medicinal properties.)

CHAPTER 6

WILD STRAWBERRIES

There are always a lot of dark subjects in this world, Maomao thought. She had thought of it as she sat on the boxes behind the laundry area.

It doesn't seem like Shaoran will come today, and since Maomao didn't have much work to do even if she went back, she decided to kill some time.

She had thought about going to the medical office to sponge off snacks from the quack doctor, but he seemed busy for these couple of days, wrapped up into something troubling, so she didn't.

As for what is troubling, it was that perfume oil incident.

On the incident from the other day, Jinshi left for the other consorts' place. Thereupon, he learnt that the maids had bought a lot from the caravans.

(Not like I don't understand.)

Were they imported goods from far away, from over the deserts, over the seas, over the mountains, it would be given that the young maidens who were confined in a birdcage would yearn for it, their eyes shining.

Were there medicines introduced from the West stocked in the tents, even Maomao would go as far as to borrow money from the madam to acquire them.

She must not blame the court ladies who bought things.

Even the maids of the Jade Palace bought many things too.

It wasn't that any of the products were dangerous. As wasteful as it was, nevermind how little there was, anything containing poison mustn't be kept and had to be disposed of.

The amounts were minuscule when used separately, but when combined together, it could become a strong poison.

Well then, the problem of exactly "who" brought it in.

Currently, there are four high-ranked consorts in the inner palace.

Consort Gyokuyou, Consort Rifa, Consort Riishu, and Consort Rouran.

Among them, Consort Gyokuyou has the highest favour from the emperor, with Consort Rifa coming in second. In addition, she heard that there are several middle-ranked consorts who were the emperor's chosen.

However, considering parental influence in the background, Consort Rouran is an existence extremely important to the emperor.

(Hmm.)

Maomao picked up a dead branch and drew an orchid¹ on the ground.

It was Consort Rifa's parents who were the next highest in terms of position. Though, as she related to the emperor from his maternal side, it was said that her family didn't have the character to be *that* greedy for promotion.

She drew a fruit² next to the orchid.

Conversely, it was Consort Riishu's family who rose to prominence in these couple of generations, and it was well known that – having chosen their young daughter for the previous emperor – they were an ambitious family.

She drew a tree³ next to that.

Consort Gyokuyou's family was in a trading post in the West. Although that gave a strong impression that it profited through commerce, it was actually situated close to the country border and seems to go through with having quite some defence expenditure. On top of that, it wasn't a place that produced crops, so it wasn't a place you could unconditionally call wealthy.

She finished off with drawing a leaf⁴.

Maomao had a question.

The attempted poisoning incident at the Garden Party last year. That was done by Previous Consort Ah Dou's maid out of her own accord. The reason she did that wasn't

to cling onto power, but rather, it was out of a truly humane motive.

She understood that, but.

Who was the culprit for Consort Gyokuyou's attempted poisoning incident from further back?

That remained uncertain.

As a result, the number of Consort Gyokuyou's maids decreased by half, and it was said that the one who took the poison on behalf of the consort was still suffering from the after-effects.

(I feel that it's not related to Ah Duo-sama.)

Ah Duo didn't have the character to poison people like that. Saying that, Consort Rifa and Consort Riishu were the same.

Of course, this was Maomao's opinion, she cannot assert whether that it really was the case.

It could be the case that the maids did it out of their own accord, and it might also be that there are people that were sent in from her family.

Not just high-ranked consorts, she also considered the middle-ranked consorts. After all, there are plenty of women in this place who are greedily vying for a higher position.

Maomao groaned as she traced the stick around the four pictures.

Then, she abandoned her thinking.

(What's the point of thinking.)

Maomao was a mere maid, a throwaway piece of a food taster.

And so, she decided for a change of mood. For the enjoyment of the emperor, the inner palace had a lot of gardens. If there was a pine forest, there were also a bamboo thicket as well as an orchard.

(I guess it would be wild strawberries this season.)

If it was an extra month earlier, she could have harvested bamboo shoots, but that was

over when she was cultivating roses in the Crystal Palace because of some fox glasses. It was truly irritating, he was an unpleasant being by just recalling his face.

Just the act of thinking of changing her mood made her steps lighter, so she headed towards the grove of mixed trees at the corner of the inner palace. Along the way, she ended up bumping into the maids from the Crystal Palace.

As they were faces she knew, she greeted the court ladies with a slight nod, but their faces stiffened and they ended up running away. Even though one of them had small feet from foot-binding, she actually moved so fast that Maomao was unexpectantly impressed.

(So exaggerated. I just stripped them a little.)

It was a scene often seen in the brothels. Women, who were bought up to that level, first knock on the gates of the prostitution quarter and begin by getting their clothes stripped off to be evaluated.

Young blooming maidens seem to have high value, but compared to youth, intelligence was more mainstream nowadays. Unexpectantly, the wives of ruined officials garnered a high price. On top of reducing the initial investment as they had been thoroughly educated to a certain level, the fact that they were once another person's wife in this society conversely gave an unpleasant idea of temptation.

It wasn't that Maomao even stripped them because she liked it. For the court ladies who were attuned to fads, she had believed that all of them had been wearing the perfume they bought, but there were court ladies who weren't the case. Maomao, thinking it strange, had only just gone to check whether they were wearing it or not.

Due to that, she was told on by the beautiful eunuch.

(Well, not like there was one person.)

The Crystal Palace had a lot of court ladies. There were more than ten people for maids alone, and if you include the exclusive maidservants there were about thirty people.

Without thinking too hard, Maomao went to search for wild strawberries.



When she returned carrying a lot of wild strawberries hidden in the washing basket, Airan told her that there was a letter in her room. *The beanpole maid is smirking more than usual*, she thought as she entered her room, and as she was told there was a simple letter on her desk.

(Who is it?)

She looked for the sender. There was 'Rihaku' written there. She recalled the young military officer who was like a spirited large-breed dog.

She opened the letter. Casual boring things like how he was surprised that she went back to the inner palace again and so forth were written on it. And then, afterwards, the main question of **'Recently, I can't meet up with Pairin, so can'tcha do something about it?'** was relayed in a roundabout way. *The man looked like even his brain was muscle, but it seems he wrote a high-level composition for what he hinted at the introduction*, Maomao thought something truly impolite.

Pairin was popular, but she was already the age where it was a good time for her to retire as a prostitute. She must be thinking of taking over the shop as the madam, or getting redeemed by a rich patron.

It was unfortunate, but with Rihaku's current wages, he cannot possibly afford the redeeming price.

(Sorry. Just give up.)

While thinking that, Maomao was going to finishing reading the letter, but then there seemed to be an addendum written at the end.

'I want to return the ivory pipe I was holding onto last time. Also, there's something I want to ask you. Can we meet up?'

(Return? Did he not find the owner?)

She recalled the thing about the pipe she entrusted to Rihaku from quite a while ago.

(You mean that we can't keep exchanging letter huh.)

Maomao tilted her head the strangely profound words as she stuffed her mouth with the wild strawberries from the basket.

1. The 蘭Ran in 楼蘭Rouran means orchid.
2. The 梨Ri in 梨花Rifa means pear.
3. The 樹Shu in 里樹Riishu means tree.
4. The 葉You in 玉葉Gyokuyou means leaf.

CHAPTER 7

REDEEMING STRATEGY (1)

“About how much is the redeeming money for prostitutes?”

Maomao stood flabbergasted at what Rihaku, who was waiting in the room that connected the inner palace and the outside, said.

Even though Maomao had gone out of her way to get permission to come here, wondering what was so special about it, since she was told that they couldn't just exchange letters.

(He really is a mongrel.)

Maomao sat down on a chair as she thought that.

There was a eunuch posted as guards at each of the two entrances of the room, watching the two's movements.

Maomao had thought that since they couldn't talk about things that are *that* weird even if she directly went to meet up with him, but it would be a problem if it is something like this.

“There's a full range.”

“I'm talking about the best.”

No need to ask who Rihaku was going to redeem.

“...I understand.”

Maomao said, looking at him with narrowed eyes.

She requested the eunuch guards to lend her a brush and ink stone. Rihaku provided the paper.

“First things first. I want to say that is only a rough estimate since the estimated price

is based on the current market value.”

Maomao glided the brush, writing down “Two hundred”. You can take this as the standard silver that a peasant earns in a year. And then, double this amount should be enough as the redeeming money for cheap prostitutes. *Hm, okay*, Rihaku nodded.

“Although this doesn’t take the congratulatory money and any of the sort in consideration.”

The redeeming money is the amount of money calculated back from the number of years the prostitute has left to earn, plus some extra. Also, around double of this amount is used to celebrate the redeeming extravagantly.

“I beg you to cut to the chase. How much is the total?”

Though he was looking at her seriously, *What’s up with that*, Maomao held back her answer.

(It’s hard to say.)

Pairin has been properly working and getting customers since she debuted in the shop. If it was true that she had no debt to the brothel from clothes and kanzashi, her term of service should have already ended. Nevertheless, her staying in the brothel to work was simply that her character was made for working as a prostitute. If redeeming money was the debt a prostitute shoulders, she didn’t have any of kind of thing left.

(How old is she this year?)

Pairin, with the glossy skin, who also improved her talent in dancing year by year, had been in the brothel before Maomao was born, the oldest of the Three Princesses. Her youthful appearance sometimes conjured up rumours where “She retains her youth by absorbing energy” and so on. They even wondered that she might have grasped the so-called bedroom technique to preserve energy from making out between the opposite genders.

The person herself was still eager, and her looks had yet to decline despite her age where her value should have already been lost.

On the other hand, the madam cannot always just throw the weight of the Three Princesses around, so she should be about wanting to deal with the oldest – Pairin – soon. She had grumbled about it when Maomao returned home the other day.

While it was certainly true that they were prostitutes who became the symbols that supported the Rokushoukan when it was going down, the brothel cannot keep relying on them. When the shop is steady, if they don't give a good replacement, before one knows, it would become covered in old grime.

Maomao thought that Rihaku probably happened to hear it or something, and so he came to consult her.

Maomao groaned, scratching the back of her head.

“Supposing Pairin-nee-chan is going to be redeemed, there are two contenders.”

One was the head of a trade business, a lavish and good-natured old man who visited the Rokushoukan when it was in the state of decline. Maomao also got a lot of candy from him she was little.

He was a gentleman who mainly enjoyed himself by drinking wine and watching her dance – not for sleeping – and had proposed many times over about redeeming Pairin. The greedy old lady would skilfully evade it every time, but she might take up to his offer if it was now.

The other was a frequent customer, a high ranked official. He was still young, should be about a couple of years passed his thirties. She didn't know what post he had, but Maomao recalled the jade pendant that hung off the customer's sword hilt a couple of years back, meaning that he was in a higher position than Rihaku. He should be promoted even higher now.

As her partner for nightly play, he seems to get along pretty well with Pairin. Pairin is in a very good mood the next day.

However, something to be concerned about is that, compared to the glossy Pairin, the customer is often a bit drained.

Maomao felt uneasy for either of them when she thought about their life after redeeming.

Pairin is a beautiful prostitute with a talent in dancing, but at the same time, she was famous for being never defeated at night. Sometimes, when she gets frustrated, not just the manservants of the brothel, she even crooks her finger at other prostitutes and *kamuro*—.

In other words, she's a lust demon.

The madam, aside from redeeming her, considering whether to entrust the control of the Rokushoukan was also because of this.

Besides, Pairin also had a means to leave the brothel, but Maomao had a feeling that chance was low with her character.

(I feel that is the most harmonious choice.)

While outwardly retiring, taking customers in special circumstances, and aside from that in her free time, freely pursuing her affection is good. Since she would be freer than what she had now, she might do it with pleasure.

(Hmm.)

Maomao glanced at Rihaku.

His age was in his mid-twenties, and he had a sturdy body. His tempered upper arms like a military officer were actually to Pairin's taste.

Moreover, before, when he first came to the Rokushoukan, in the more than two full days that Maomao had eventually returned, he was confined in Pairin's room, but he didn't look tired.

"Rihaku-sama, how much do you get paid?"

"Why are you suddenly asking this?"

Rihaku said, looking slightly flustered.

"Do you get about eight-hundred silvers in a year?"

"Oi oi, don't appraise people like that."

Rihaku's face was slightly stiff. It was a face that still had allowance.

“Then, one thousand two hundred?”

“ ... ”

Seeing him going silent, she took the middle ground. Does that mean that he gets a thousand in a year? He gets quite a bit for his age.

Nonetheless, you'll want to prepare ten thousand silvers if you're redeeming a high-class prostitute. Since they are prostitutes that take a hundred for just drinking tea, and three hundred for getting to sleep.

For the latter, Rihaku had slept with Pairin for one, two times. Considering his wages, it wasn't that he couldn't pay it off completely, but that would be probably the madam's suggestion. It is highly possible that Pairin will assign Rihaku to placate her frustration.

“Is that enough?”

“It's not enough.”

“What about repayment after promotion?”

“Impossible. They'll want ten thousand upfront.”

“T-ten thousand!?”

Maomao wondered what she could do to the petrified Rihaku.

Even if you consider raising money, Rihaku wasn't bad as a redeemer. Since he looked like he has prodigal physical strength, Pairin wouldn't find him unpleasant either.

She thought she wouldn't find it unpleasant, but she didn't know whether she would go as far as to like him.

(Hmm.)

Maomao sighed deeply while looking at Rihaku who was feeling down.

“Rihaku-sama, can you stand up for a bit?”

“...okay.”

The dispirited large-breed dog obediently did at Maomao told him.

“Well then, just like that, can you take off your outer garment, raise both of your hands up to your shoulders, and flex your biceps? “

“Okay.”

The eunuchs who were guarding were flustered in response to Rihaku who was doing as she said. They stopped Rihaku who was starting to take off his clothes.

“We’re not doing anything shameful. I’m just taking a look.”

Even when Maomao said that, the eunuchs didn’t listen to her.

Rihaku, while feeling down, knelt down in a *seiza* on the chair.

“Will redeeming be cheaper if I strip?”

“I don’t know if it would get cheaper or not, but there might be a chance.”

“...I’ll strip.”

Rihaku stood up again, and stripped. He showed the jade pendant that denoted his rank to the eunuchs who were trying to stop him, thus silencing them.

Rihaku, who took a pose that allowed Maomao to see his muscles, turned around for her to see at every angle. Sometimes, she framed her thumbs and index fingers into a rectangle and peered through that.

Being a military officer, his body was very well trained. Nothing crooked in his frame, his muscles were uniform. His right arm being slightly bulkier should be because he was right-handed.

Pairin was a gross eater than ate anything if there was nothing, but she still had preferences. In this case, now, Pairin should be licking her lips.

“Well then, your bottoms too please.”

“...Bottoms too?”

“Bottoms too.”

Maomao said with a serious look.

Rihaku reluctantly put his hands on the sash of his *hakama*, and was now down to his loincloth.

Even so, Maomao’s expression remained unchanged, she observed him with a fixed stare.

His leg muscles were also firm; she gathered that Rihaku didn’t shirk from his daily training. The sinewy muscles of his thighs smoothly traced down to his knees, and from there, the muscles of his calves were also bulging.

(Really nice muscles.)

It was different to the swollen bellies from those who come to the brothel to drink. He didn’t have that sallow unhealthy skin either.

This might work, Maomao looked at the muscles rippling as Rihaku continued to shift his pose.

Rihaku seemed to be one who gets carried away quite easily, his poses gradually became energetic.

Lastly, so she could determine the most important place,

“Well then, take off the last layer...”

When she was about to say it, there was the sound of the door opening.

The energetic Rihaku’s face turned pale.

The eunuchs’ faces looked like they received death sentences.

Maomao gaped her mouth in shock.

“What the hell are you guys doing?”

The inner palace administrator with a prominent vein on his face and his adjutant stood by the door.

Beyond the door, the court ladies who were peering at Jinshi’s direction saw something improper and collapsed noisily. It seemed the stimulus was too strong for the court ladies who were distanced from men.

Maomao, for the time being,

“Pleasant day to you, Jinshi-sama,”

returned with that first.

CHAPTER 8

REDEEMING STRATEGY (2)

The world is mysterious.
Maomao thought.

Why was she kneeling in a *seiza* right now? And right before her eyes, Jinshi was looking at her with chilly eyes.

Rihaku, who was in the room with them until a moment ago, dejectedly went back half-naked.

How unfair, she thought. Though she also figured that it might be better if he wasn't there since it would be more confusing otherwise.

"What the hell were you doing?"

It's scary when a beauty is angry, Maomao thought, raising her head.

Jinshi made a daunting pose, his arms crossed, looking overbearing. Behind him, Gaoshun put his hands together, his face like a monk who has reached the state of selflessness.

The two eunuchs at each of the entrances looked exhausted, but they kept glancing over to the beautiful head eunuch.

It seems that the court ladies were peeping at them from beyond the door that was firmly shut; they were surely fidgety. *What should I do when I get out*, Maomao thought about what happens afterwards.

"Even if you ask me what I was doing, I was just giving a consultation."

She'll properly report it to Honnyan first at the Jade Palace. Laundry finished in the morning. And since there were no tea parties planned for today, she didn't need to food taste. There shouldn't be an issue on the side of work if she returned by dinner time.

"In that case, why was that man looking like that?"

Ahh, about that huh, Maomao thought.

Certainly, though they may have been standing before the guards, it was too great of a problem to have a man from outside the inner palace almost buck-naked.

I need to properly fix that misunderstanding, Maomao thought.

“We’re not doing anything shameful. I didn’t touch anything. I was just inspecting.”

She emphasised to him that she was only looking. Not a finger touched him. She wanted him to understand that.

However, Jinshi’s eyes widened. He looked slightly taken back.

She noticed that Gaoshun’s expression moved from the state of selflessness to *nirvana*¹. Why was he looking as Maomao with the face of a *bodhisattva*²?

“You, were, inspecting?”

“Yes. I was just looking.”

“For what reason?”

“Even if you ask for what reason. It was the result of the consultation. I thought I’d make sure whether it’ll turn out fine by seeing the actual thing.”

Maomao had considered Pairin’s redeeming and everything else about it, but she also wanted to place importance on Pairin’s feelings. She was a woman who had fallen in love several times, but Maomao thought it would be preferable for her to go a man she liked more.

That’s why, at any degree, Maomao, who knew about her tastes, wanted to check whether Rihaku could get into Pairin’s strike zone. Even Maomao, for how much, in the case that Rihaku was too far apart from Pairin’s tastes, she wouldn’t do things like accept a consultation like this. She wasn’t *that* soft-hearted to the point of looking after others.

Until Maomao was taken in by her dad, she was brought up at the Rokushoukan. The people who looked after her that time were the Three Princesses – Pairin, Meimei,

Joga – and the madam.

Pairin has never given birth, but since she had the special constitution to produce milk, Maomao was raised by drinking that. In the days when Maomao was born, Pairin had only just graduated from being a *kamuro*, but it seemed that her body had already completely matured.

She always called Pairin “Neechan”, but in actual fact, she was an existence closer to a “Mother”. By the way, she called Meimei and Joga “Neechan³” since they would get angry when she called them “Neesan⁴”.

The talks of redeeming had been raised but it was probable that neither of the contenders would provide Pairin the lifestyle she desired.

Nevertheless, Maomao would rather she not end up like the madam in this way.

With the reason that they were once prostitutes, there are many women who gave up on having children. There are also cases where their wombs don’t have the ability to make a child, having been constantly soaked with contraceptives and abortion drugs.

Maomao didn’t know whether Pairin was like this or not. Just that, when she recalled the days she was rocked to sleep in the woman’s arms when she was younger, she thought that it was a waste.

She was a woman whose lust was strong, but she was also a woman who was just as maternal.

Rihaku fell in love with Pairin who is a prostitute. She is a prostitute – he completely understood that she would give the same service to other customers besides himself. Though he has parts there were somewhat like a mongrel, he seemed to be earnest at heart. He also has that lovable idiotic side of him where he tries to get promoted for her sake.

Since he has quite the wholehearted personality, his feelings shouldn’t abate easily. Even if it does, even Maomao can handle the preparations on the occasion of them separating.

Above all, his physical strength was peerless.

Maomao giving Rihaku a consultation was also because of that reason. Although, given that he hinted at a different thing at first, she was also interested in that other thing too. What will come out of that now?

(In the end he couldn't give it back to me.)

It was about the ivory pipe. If no one wanted to use it, she was going to pawn it.

While she was in the middle of evaluating that, Jinshi turned up.

Could it be that he, as the administrator of the inner palace, couldn't stomach court ladies recklessly meeting up with outside men? What a strange moment to be enthusiastic about his job.

"Turn out fine, you say!?"

"Yes. Appearance is only just one aspect of a person, but it is better to have it, right?"

Rihaku's body almost passed with flying colours. At the end, checking the most important part, hereafter, she considered how it would arouse Pairin.

Maomao said that the redeeming money was ten thousand silvers, but depending on how it could go, she can drop it up to half the amount. This was also dependant on how Pairin felt about Rihaku.

"Appearance is important?"

Jinshi finally stopped being imposing and sat down on the chair. He continued to be irritated, tapping his shoes on the floor.

"Accordingly."

Jinshi said. *He looks somewhat down huh*, Maomao thought.

"You saying that is unexpected. Then, how is that man's appearance?"

He's just full of questions, Maomao thought. However, it was bitter that an underling had to answer everything.

"His body was really well proportioned. The foundation of his training is steady, and he doesn't have extra bulk in his upper and lower muscles. I suppose he is diligent and never misses his daily training. It seems that he is quite skilled even among military officers."

Jinshi's eyes were slightly bulging from Maomao's speech. It was an expression that could be taken as that he was surprised by what Maomao had said. And then, he looked extremely displeased.

"Do you know what kind of person they are by looking at their body?"

"Roughly. Since your lifestyle habits show up on your body."

It was important to make sure when you prescribe medicine to customers who say nothing about themselves. She acquired that skill even if she didn't want to when she was being a pharmacist.

"Will you know by looking at my body as well?"

"...Hah?"

Maomao unintentionally raised her voice stupidly.

Seeing Jinshi's face, it wasn't like she didn't notice that his expression was a little sulky.

(Don't tell me,)

Isn't this man just jealous of Rihaku, she thought.

His displeased expression just then should also be because of that reason. Since Maomao was openly admiring Rihaku's physical beauty.

(This man.)

Maomao wanted to sigh.

(To think that he wants to flaunt that he himself is more pretty.)

Jinshi's face was beautiful; it was already a beauty that could rapidly overthrow the country if he was a woman, and she felt that it wasn't impossible even as a man. While possessing a beautiful face that was so perfect it spared no change, does he want to boast about his body this time?

(You don't need to do anything, don't need to do anything.)

Jinshi's body that she had a fleeting look before was surprisingly muscular. Even if she didn't take a hard look at it, she knew that his body was beautiful.

But, even if she looked at it, what will come out of it? If his body was more built than Rihaku, does he even want to say, *Recommend me to Pairin*? No, she considered what Pairin would say, would she choose Jinshi?

Jinshi propped his elbows on the table, his lips slightly pursed, and stared at Maomao.

Behind, the eunuch guards were nervous, and yet they were entranced by Jinshi's angry face.

Gaoshun was looking at Maomao, his gentle bearing the picture of *nirvana*.

She was sorry for Jinshi, but she had to say this clearly. The part that Pairin considered the most important component of the body, Jinshi didn't have it.

No matter how excellent the other parts were. If he didn't have it, there was no meaning.

"Even if I looked at Jinshi's body, there's no meaning."

Maomao said timidly.

The air around them dropped to freezing.

Gaoshun did a revolution from the picture of *nirvana*, his face was like a criminal that had broken spider web.

"Unfortunately, I don't think Jinshi-sama is compatible with my older sister."

"Hah?"

A stupid voice came out of Jinshi's mouth.

Gaoshun slammed his head into a wall.

I'll take this opportunity to clear up some misunderstanding.

- First off, this is the web novel version.

There are substantial differences between this version and the light novel version (which is published in physical book form; no ebook version for this though). As for what the differences are, I plan to talk about them on my old blog once I reach the part in the web novel. Though we're officially in line with the third volume of the light novel, I'm still also covering territory from the second volume of the light novel btw. (The 'Redeeming' chapter is in the second volume as part of the events that transpired while Maomao was in the inner palace before the 'Blue Rose' chapter)

But this doesn't mean that the web novel isn't worth reading. The writing is just as good, and many chapters in the light novel are exactly as it is in the web novel, albeit condensed together into longer chapters. As there are sections in the light novel that are not in the web novel, there are also sections in the web novel that aren't in the light novel either (good for additional insight mhm).

For best experience, I suggest reading both :>

Also, the manga should follow the light novel version, so you'll eventually get those additional scenes in picture form... how nice... Maomao dancing on the top of the wall, yes...

- Next, despite having a female protagonist, this novel is classified as a seinen novel.

The label (hero bunko) the current light novel is published under is aimed towards males.

- Finally, on my own translation:

I am aware that my translations are rife with ambiguous sentences, wonky grammar structures, punctuation errors and all those other terrible things in the world that will make an editor cry ||[(°Δ°)|||. I am pretty new as far as translators go, so I still have a lot to learn on that part too.

I will be overjoyed and super grateful if people do point them out when they come upon them. I am working on this alone, both translating and editing, so there will be bound to be mistakes that I will miss completely even after countless re-readings.

Now that I said my piece, enjoy the novel! Revel in the bundle of misunderstandings

that is Maomao! Feel for the poor misunderstood eunuch(?) that is Jinshi! And once again, thanks for reading. Hope you enjoy your stay o/

1. Buddhist term: the realisation of selflessness, and thus liberated from the cycle of rebirth.
2. Buddhist term: Someone on the path to enlightenment towards becoming a Buddha
3. Means 'older sister', less formal than the latter.
4. Also means 'older sister', more formal than the former. Another possible way to differentiate between them is that this one could be denoted as 'elder sister'?

CHAPTER 9

REDEEMING STRATEGY (3)

What is going on? Rihaku thought.

The eunuch who had glared at him when he made a small blunder the other day was currently right before him. Moreover, this guy was giving him a considerably beautiful smile.

He was pretty sure the eunuch's name was Jinshi. He was likely to be younger than Rihaku, and yet he was in the emperor's pocket. He had good looks – there were rumours of him being the emperor's chosen – but he was diligent and careful on his job.

It's a bit of an issue that he could charm his surroundings regardless of gender, but that aside, there was nothing about him that is worth minding, Rihaku thought. For that point, Rihaku was straight so he would never point his finger to a man no matter how pretty he is.

Nevertheless, he can't help saying that it was quite troubling to have this guy to suddenly turn up and stare at him fixedly.

It's good that there's no one around, Rihaku thought. They were at the building superior officers were in. There were few random people in the vicinity. That's right. The weirdo tactician is here, so people try to minimise their coming here.

He frequently heard that the weirdo tactician has been loitering elsewhere recently. *But limited to seeing the personnel in this place, it would be this eunuch who accompanies him for work,* Rihaku supposed.

Rihaku also thought to submit his documents and quickly leave this place so he won't get caught up in something bothersome. But as he left Rakan's office, he just had to come across this eunuch.

And, it was mysterious because of this smile.

Well, speaking of mysterious.

The adjutant who was waiting behind the eunuch who was called Jinshi or something was the official from before who had said he wanted Rihaku to be the middleman for the brothel. Rihaku was nigh sure that this was his superior's old acquaintance.

When he thought about the circumstances where he knew Maomao, the court lady with freckles, he kind of grasped that they had such a connection.

"I wonder if you can join me for a bit?"

In saying that, it was Rihaku who wasn't in the position to decline. Though the other party was younger, the colour of the jade suspended at his waist was nobler than Rihaku's. He would have to be promoted another four to five times just to oppose him.

"By your will."

After giving a short reply, Rihaku followed the eunuchs.



They were in the courtyard of the imperial court, a place where superior officers often cooled off in the evening. Hence it was somehow difficult for junior officers to enter. There was no one around especially during this period. It was a place that Rihaku never visited as he was indifferent to refined tastes.

This season, plants called hydrangeas were starting to sprout large flowers that look like *temari balls*¹. They were unusual flowers brought over from an island country of the east. It was said its colours changed between red and blue according to the day. Seems the weirdo tactician had purposely planted them². The shape of the flowers vaguely resembled lilacs.

He felt that that guy might be doing too much as he pleased, but according to what he heard, even the general was no match to that monocle weirdo so it can't be helped.

Jinshi sat on a chair in the gazebo and gestured for Rihaku to sit.

If he says so I have no choice but to do so. He sat down facing the eunuch.

The eunuch rested his chin on top of his clasped hands and displayed a smile that seemed to sparkle. The adjutant behind him seemed like he was used to it, but Rihaku

couldn't agree with it. It was a joke, it was so bright he wanted to look away.

If he was a woman, it wouldn't necessarily be a lie to say that he could topple the country, Rihaku thought. But, this guy was a man, a man, even if he had already lost that important thing of his.

Rihaku could be deceived with that celestial maiden's face and silky hair, but that guy had stature and his shoulders were broad. He wouldn't look slight standing next to his adjutant who had a figure of a military officer.

If Rihaku were to be deceived by that gentle smile and push that guy down, he would suffer severely. That seeming elegance simply indicated the sleekness of his movement.

Rihaku had thought about the eunuch when he followed behind him. Also, he had a feeling he remembered him from somewhere, but he just couldn't recall it. He had a glimpse of that guy's face before, though he never looked at him properly, so why was he caught up in this?

What does this gentleman want from him?

"I heard from our maid, that *you* seem to have someone in your heart."

Rihaku could be overthinking that he thought it was shady that he was termed as **'You'**³.

He deliberated for a moment who this Our **'Maid'** was, but considering the flow of the conversation, it just had to be that scrawny, freckled court lady.

That saying, there was a time she worked in the imperial court. She couldn't have been working under this eunuch. Rihaku inadvertently stroked his chin.

He thought that girl was employed by a person with strange tastes, but who would think that this beautiful eunuch would that kind of person.

However, although that situation in itself required an explanation, *Did she talk about redeeming people?* Rihaku can't say he didn't think of that. Was it for that reason? That this eunuch randomly came by smiling.

For this youth, who had the reputed status of being called the country's greatest beauty, something like redeeming a prostitute would be nothing more than a funny

story.

You can make a fool of me, but if you look down on my sweetheart, Pairin, Rihaku had considered it too.

Pairin was a good woman. Not just as a prostitute, but as a mere woman too.

He recalled her smiling face in the bedroom. He recalled her clutching onto her dress with her fingers, her dancing form. He recalled her pouring tea, her figure as she worried about trivial matters.

That was the end of the matter if he was told that was a given with a prostitute's job. *But, that was fine too,* Rihaku thought.

Real or fake, either way was fine.
If he believed in it, either way didn't matter.

He saw many of his colleagues who were crazy for prostitutes and gambling, but he surely had to be one of those people if he looked at it objectively. The guys who say that Pairin was a wicked woman for Rihaku were surely thinking about Rihaku.

While feeling grateful, he also thought it was meddlesome.

Rihaku visited the Rokushoukan out of his own accord. Not to meet Pairin; to end the day being entertained by *kamuro* with just tea at the entrance time and time again.

Being the flower on the high cliff, that was Pairin's job too.

Taking a month of silver with just drinking tea, who could say that was greed?

To squander all of himself on prostitutes, calling the prostitutes who live as a commodity as expensive was even more severe.

If the eunuch before his eyes spat out words that insulted Pairin, Rihaku was prepared to use his fists.

If he did so, it was a slip-up where his head might fly.
That was fine too, Rihaku thought.

He won't yield from his thoughts; this sort of reckless way of living suited him. It had nothing to do with him being slandered as a prostitute-crazy fool by everyone around

him.

For the time being, he focused on restraining himself. Left hand pinning down his quivering right hand, Rihaku looked at Jinshi.

“And what about it?”

It shouldn't have nothing to do with ya, he made sure he didn't say too much.

Even in response to Rihaku's displeased attitude, Jinshi didn't seem to mind. His heavenly smile remained as it is.

And then, those lips proclaimed something astonishing.

“What if I tell you that I'll shoulder your redeeming money?”

“!?”

Rihaku was surprised. He inadvertently stood up and slapped the table. Since it was a carved granite table, his palms were vibrating gradually.

Even when the trembling passed through the entire length of his body, it took a while until Rihaku was able to speak out.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean what I mean. How much do you need for the redeeming money? Will twenty thousand be enough?”

To say twenty thousand like it was nothing, Rihaku gulped. It wasn't a sum you would recklessly give out. To say nothing of that, was this something you suddenly say to an official you don't really know even as a rival?

Did he already hear about the redeeming money from Maomao, or does this man think that is just simple loose change? Rihaku clutched his head.

At the same time, more than suggesting twenty thousand, *he could easily give out half of that*, he didn't not think that, but Rihaku decided to stop with any more of his naïve thinking.

“I’m happy for your words, but it is alright for you to suddenly say such things to an official you don’t know?”

There is a trap in generous offers. Rihaku wasn’t a fool who would go as far as to lose sight of common sense that even children knew.

He sat back down on the chair and looked at the other’s eyes. The subject who suggested the enormous sum didn’t change his expression. The adjutant who was behind him made an expression of relief.

“Our cat had quite a strong sense of wariness. She, accepted a consultation with you, and besides that, considered how you would be as an equal companion for her older sister.”

The cat would be Maomao. Certainly, calling her a cat, she was like a cat. A wary-filled stray cat, but if you give her bait, she would somehow approach you, only accept the bait you give her, and then quickly run away.

It was a creature that didn’t suit Rihaku if he were to raise it. A dog more docile, that will hunt with him, was still preferable.

But that way of talking, does that mean that even with that attitude of hers, Maomao had faith in Rihaku? Certainly, she listened to him talk with chilly eyes while resting her chin in her hands like it was tiresome, but she did answer everything Rihaku had asked.

Why did she get him naked and make him take various poses, and moreover for what reason did she do it?

As a result, he ended up talking to the eunuch like this.

“So you mean, if I could just embrace the wary cat, I can be trusted.”

Jinshi reacted with a twitch at Rihaku’s words.

Did I say something bad? Rihaku thought, but he decided that was just his imagination as Jinshi has returned to his usual gentle smile.

“I asked about your story from several people. You may have been the son of a district government official, but you must have had hardships in becoming a military officer at the capital.”

“Accordingly.”

Things called factions exists anywhere. Though his father was a government official, he was a district civil official. That in itself oppressed strongly against him, and there was also a brief period where he flat-out wasn’t acknowledged.

“When I asked, I heard you were noticed by the Tactician with the discerning eye and was entrusted a body of troops.”

“...Yes.”

Just how far did this man investigate Rihaku. Officially, he advanced due to the squadron head quitting as a military officer.

“Thinking that they want to get along with a promising official, anyone would think that, right?”

Although, twenty thousand silvers was much too lavish.

What Rihaku needed was half of that, no, considering his own connections and his savings, another half of that is fine.

If it was a quarter – five thousand silvers – this man should indulgently present that to him.

It was a proposition he wanted so bad he could taste it, but Rihaku shook his head.

Rihaku looked at Jinshi’s face with a serious expression.

“I am honestly happy you would buy her for me, and I want the proposition so bad that I feel like I could taste it. However, I cannot just take your silvers. For you, she might be a prostitute, but for me, she is just a woman. Accepting the woman I want to welcome as my wife with the money I earned, that way, wouldn’t I be called a man then? ”

Rihaku conveyed to the eunuch, although it was tiring to use language he wasn’t used to.

Rihaku thought Jinshi was someone who cannot help being displeased, but that celestial maiden’s face remained unchanged. No, it became more tender compared to some time ago.

That smile shifted to laughter.

“I see. Then excuse me.”

The eunuch stood up with grace and smoothly ran his fingers through his hair. Like the painting of a beauty, the subject of the standing figure had a face that looked satisfied.

“Hereafter, there might be things I want to talk to you about, it is alright?”

“By your will.”

Rihaku also stood up and gave thanks with a palm over his fist.

The beautiful eunuch returned a slight nod and left with the adjutant in tow.

Rihaku was in a daze, waiting until the back of the elegant figure could no longer be seen.

And then—.

“Just what was that, really?”

He plucked his hair in incomprehension. When he felt the part that was still bald from the burn, he felt a little down.

He sat down on the chair,

“What do now—“

He muttered.

For now, during the time of his next training session, should he show something a bit good in front of his superior, or should he increase his workload?

No, before all that.

He should send a message to the woman he didn’t know when he will meet. However,

he wasn't going to arbitrarily go meet her, he was going to ask for her opinion. Even if that was lip service, he believed he was giving her her daily bread.

"Aight"

Rihaku plunged his hands into his sleeves and jogged away from the courtyard.

While thinking what would be a good branch to tie around the message.



"Maomao, you have a message."

Guien held out to Maomao some bundled-up wooden slips. Maomao pulled the cord that was tied around it, and there, elegant characters were carefully inscribed on it.

It was the reply to the letter Maomao sent to the Rokushoukan a couple of days ago.

"Whatever granny says, I'm still in active service."

The figure of a voluptuous, well-endowed older sister saying that with confidence came to mind.

The sender was Pairin.

"Besides, I'm waiting for my nobleman from somewhere to come for me one day."

The nobleman⁴ she wrote was pronounced as "prince". In a distant foreign country, there was a "prince" that rides a white horse who comes to save the captured maiden.

Pairin was a woman. You can also say she tends to have dreams, like a woman.

It was already too late for her to be called a maiden. Even if the number of relationships with gentlemen she had was already a number she couldn't count with her fingers, she had never given up on dreaming.

Her determination might be one reason she retained her youth.

(I had that feeling it was something like that.)

Ten thousand silvers shouldn't be required as long as she was interested. Just acting

as the “prince” as she likes would be good enough. For that, unparalleled strength, muscles, and the thing that a normal man has that a eunuch does not. A bit of an acting ability and preparing just the congratulatory money should be good enough.

The redeeming money aside, if even the congratulatory money was haggled down, there shouldn't be anyone who would be silent.

Even the madam,

“If you retire then do as you see fit. Just that the celebration must be done in style.”

She said. Even the normally stingy hag was lavish for that.

She was Pairin, the Large Rose that bloomed in the prostitution quarter. Even when she departs from the stage, she would want to have something suitably grand. That was the pride as living as a prostitute.

And so, if there was a man that the hag and Pairin both like, they wouldn't overcharge him. Just as the necessary expenses, they would take five thousand as congratulatory money.

If it wasn't a man who could earn about that much, he wouldn't be appropriate for Pairin, and if he was stingy it would be unreasonable.

(Ten thousand was impossible, but if it is about five thousand.)

If Rihaku favourably promotes from here on, he'll somehow manage in a couple of years.

What happens after will depend on luck.

If Pairin gets brainwashed by the madam's thinking, it will be the end. Rihaku will have to collect the money to drop Pairin before that happened.

It wasn't something that Maomao could do about it.

If it happens, there is one just one thing that he would have to cautious about.

(No way he would incur things like debt huh.)

Even if he collected the money by borrowing from someone, the madam would thoroughly investigate it. If it turns out like it, it would be the end. *You would dare with Pairin*, she would crush a man with debt with all her power.

Maomao thought that sort of behaviour wouldn't happen, but that couldn't be asserted.

Maomao tied up the wooden slips she was done with reading and placed it on the desk in her room.

She went out into the corridor. Jinshi and the others have visited the Jade Palace after a few days.

Jinshi was simply displeased when they parted the other day, but he looked like he was in a good mood for some reason today.

While wondering what was up, Maomao headed for the kitchen to prepare tea.

1. 手毬, handballs made from embroidered fabric.
2. Flower language: patient affection, happy family get-together, familiar connection etc.
3. Jinshi is saying *kimi* 君, which is a more familiar second person pronoun compared to the usual *anata* 貴方. Sounds somewhat condescending here.
4. 公子, koushi, young noblemen. Omitted the 'young' so it's less of a mouthful.

CHAPTER 10

CHOICE

A couple of days later, the ivory pipe was delivered to Maomao's place along with a letter. The sender was Rihaku.

(You should've just done that in the first place.)

So in the end, him directly coming to meet up with Maomao was so he could talk to someone about Pairin. Normally, if you talk about redeeming a prostitute, you would be persuaded to just "Give up". Since Maomao knew about the brothel, he probably wanted to talk to her.

(Even so...)

Maomao squinted at the ivory pipe. It's a good item; it should be valued at more than one silver.

(What does he mean, unwanted?)

Maomao set the pipe down on the desk, and resumed reading the letter. Seeing the description that was written there, Maomao raised her eyebrows.

'Are there anything among these that can be poisonous?'

So it said.

(You should've just asked me earlier.)

Why did he put off such an important matter? Maomao thought.

Her lips curved, to the point of impudence. Even she thought it was ridiculous, but that was Maomao's nature so it can't be helped. She traced the audacious words with her finger, her eyes squinted in delight.



That night, a visitor turned up at the Jade Palace. Today, it was a noble gentleman sporting a beautiful beard. Namely, it was the emperor.

The maids, for as much as they could, hurried to make the bedroom without raising their heads. They lit the emperor's favourite incense and prepared a supper that bolstered vitality. Of course, this was all for appearances. His actual objective was to play with his sole daughter, Princess Rinrii.

Consort Gyokuyou didn't really like gaudy things, but since her birthplace was a trading post, her room was littered with furnishings from other countries. Her couch was the same, even the shape of her incense burner was a little different to what Maomao knew.

Consort Gyokuyou had a character where she paid attention to unseen places, so she was particular about the lining of clothes, incense, and the such.

Perhaps to thank the emperor for his fatigue, an incense that composes emotions was lit. Consort Gyokuyou, with undivided attention for that point, always lit the incense that she chose herself.

It was a pity that Infa and the others weren't allowed to use the perfumes they bought themselves. The intention was that things that could harm the body were taken out just in case, but in this case, it appeared that the scents clashed with the incense that was being used.

Since the supper had become quite warm, there was a refreshing salad of seafood and seaweed dressed in citrus vinegar, and eight-treasure porridge that was heaped with jujubes and legumes. This noble gentleman is really aimed at health despite his appearance.

As usual, Maomao ate the vinegared dish that was served up on a silver dish. She had to eat quickly since silver tarnishes in acidity. *Since doing that would make this meaningless, we'll have to change the dishes to normal ones after this*, Maomao thought.

She picked up the seafood and seaweed with a pair of chopsticks and put it in her mouth. Speaking of seaweed, she recalled the incident from the other day. That time, the official's younger brother who was taken as the perpetrator had died in prison.

Not even knowing whether it was simply food poisoning or a poisoning, that sort of incident.

Suddenly, something connected inside Maomao.

“Ahh.”

Her voice leaked out unintentionally.

The emperor and Consort Gyokuyou, and then Honnyan, looked at Maomao.

“Wh-what is it?”

Honnyan said, her voice hitched at Maomao’s tone.

Remembering that she was in the middle of food tasting, Maomao thought, *Ah crap.*

“No, there’s nothing wrong.”

Maomao shook her head.

“I-is that so. Then that’s fine.”

Honnyan said, staring at Maomao.

The expression on the emperor’s face was unreadable. Princess Rinrii was touching his beard. Consort Gyokuyou was watching Maomao with sparkling eyes.

(There isn’t anything amusing of the sort.)

Amusing wasn’t good. Since this had to do with people dying.

Thinking that, Maomao set down the chopsticks.



“I heard that you know who is the perpetrator of the incident from the other day.”

In the room of the inner palace chief, Jinshi said.

As usual, the chief has left her seat, so there was only Jinshi, Maomao and Gaoshun in the room. Perhaps Jinshi was staying for a while, there were a couch and a long desk

prepared in the plain yet spacious room. There was a basket of fruits set in the middle of the table.

The incident from the other day was the incident where the man who attempted to poison the official had died. He had died from eating the meal he was treated to after the Spring Garden Party. She was sure that it was still unknown whether it was a poisoning or a simple food poisoning.

“I don’t know that much.”

Maomao had handed a message over to Jinshi, reporting to him that there was something about that incident that she wanted to talk about. It was only just that. It was troubling that he leapt to such a conclusion.

“I only know, how, the ingredients with poison was chosen.”

“You sure? About that.”

“Yes.”

(Probably.)

Speaking in such an ambiguous manner would get dad angry huh, Maomao thought. Her dad, the former medical officer, hated ambiguous evidence.

Such that, Maomao mustered her confidence and went to meet Jinshi like this. Going out of their way to change the location was also because they understood that Consort Gyokuyou would eavesdrop if they speak about this at the Jade Palace.

“You said you didn’t know what ingredients were given out, but you know what the other prisoners ate, right.”

“If it’s that’s much.”

On behalf of Jinshi, Gaoshun started to write what was given out the prisoners on a sheet of paper.

Maomao nodded, *I see*, as she looked over that.

(I thought it was possibly like this.)

Maomao grasped the message in her bosom. It was the letter she received from Rihaku yesterday. The same thing Gaoshun had written down was exactly what was on that letter.

It was possible, but it might be that Rihaku had thought this incident was suspicious as well. *Although he was a person in the military, it was a strange coincidence that he sniffed out the same thing*, Maomao thought.

That's exactly why Maomao had noticed it too.

"You mean that there is something with poison among these?"

Jinshi sat on the chair, scanning the page.

Soup and pickles, sliced meat and grilled fish. It doesn't seem like there was anything unusual.

Maomao picked up the brush, and drew a wavy line on several dishes there were written down.

These were all dishes that were prepared as appetisers.

"Incorrect. Rather, it's the opposite. These all don't have poison."

Maomao set down the brush, and repeatedly tapped the dishes with the wavy line with her finger.

"How is the order of the dishes delivered to the prisoners decided?"

"...Standardly, it is delivered from the front of the prison. They choose what they like from the dishes that are presented. Since the prisoners closer to the front have lighter crimes, they have options to pick from."

Gaoshun answered. *Maybe it was because he was formerly in the military, how detailed*, Maomao thought.

"Then, where was the dead man's cell positioned?"

"Until he has officially judged, he is positioned in the front."

Around there, Jinshi and Gaoshun's faces gave a start.

"You mean, he chose it? The dish with poison."

"Yes."

"How did he?"

At Jinshi's question, Maomao once again looked over the dish she pointed out a moment ago. The appetisers didn't have anything unusual about them, but there was a certain commonality.

"These were all dishes that were made using seaweed."

About seaweed, the dead man couldn't have gotten a good impression on it. He also had recognised it as a deadly poison.

Did he need to choose it specifically?

Several varieties of appetiser were prepared. All were dishes that were made with seaweed, except for the one dish arranged that didn't use seaweed.

Afterwards, they prepared only enough for the number of prisoners, and just had to pass those over to the jailer.

Aside from the name of the dishes, Rihaku's letter also roughly wrote down the ingredients. She was struck with this method when she connected the dishes from Rihaku's letter and the incident from the other day.

If it was the case, there was one other thing she understood.

And that was—.

"The one who did it, might be someone who knew about seaweed poison. This is only just a hypothesis though."

Maomao thought it was mysterious. On how the man could've known about seaweed poison.

Maomao had known it as knowledge since her dad, who you could say was out of the

norm, had taught her various things. *Was the man also taught by someone?*

To speak about concern, she was concerned.

If it was written down on a document somewhere, she wanted to see it.

But it was most suspicious if he was taught. Currently, this possibility was the highest.

(Well then.)

Maomao looked at the two troubled eunuchs.

Though she was interested, what happens afterwards didn't concern Maomao. Rather, she was reflecting that she said too much.

In the middle of worrying over it, Maomao had stretched her hand out towards the fruits before her eyes. They were unusual fruits from the southern countries, her hands had just wanted to reach for it.

Wasn't non-dried lychee really unusual? Just as she was going to sneakily help herself with only one, her eyes met up with Jinshi.

Maomao had stopped moving, but her outstretched hand had advanced to the front of the basket.

Jinshi picked up the fruits basket, and presented a branch laden with lychees before Maomao.

"Good job. Your reward."

Jinshi made a first-rate smile, placing the lychees on Maomao's palm.

"Thank you very much."

Maomao meekly said her thanks.

She thought to go dry half as medicine, and have the other half as a snack.

"I have expectations for next time too."

As he said that, the beautiful eunuch elegantly left the room.

(I really just can't stand that huh.)

Maomao peeled off the skin with her fingers, and carried the white fruit to her mouth. While thinking, *This is really tastier than the dried stuff*, she licked her wet fingers.

(Again, that side of him is better.)

That childishness you see occasionally when his expression crumbles a bit, is more natural hm, Maomao thought.

CHAPTER 11

PAPER

“It’s gotten really hot, hasn’t it.”

It was the quack doctor who was relaxing with his feet submerged in a bucket he filled with water. He respectfully used a medical book as a substitute fan.

“It’s going to get hotter still.”

Maomao set the laundry basket down on the medical office desk.

They were still in the rainy season – it was going to get warmer from here on. Though, maybe because it’s damp and humid, she totally understood how gross it was.

The coming season, due to the high humidity, was the source of Maomao’s annoyance. When she realised it, the medicinal herbs she took the trouble of drying will also get damp, and if she was careless, the herbs will also grow mould. It was a melancholic season.

So because of that, the reason Maomao turned up at the medical office was-

“Oh, lass. What are ya doing?”

The quack doctor said, facing Maomao who took something out from the laundry basket.

“I’m not doing nothing.”

What Maomao took out were a complete set of cleaning tools and all the bamboo charcoal she could cram inside the basket.

“Let’s clean up, this room.”

It was impermissible for the valuable medicines to get mouldy. Maomao came here for that reason.

“Eh?”

The quack doctor’s face darkened at a breath.



The quack doctor wasn’t a bad person. Rather, he was a good-natured person.
Though that had nothing to do with being a good worker, Maomao thought.

The interior of the room the quack doctor was stationed in was a medicine storage. Three walls of medicine shelves stuffed to the full, this place was *Sukhavati*¹for Maomao, but it wasn’t that she was always satisfied with it.

It had many medicines in reserve, but it was the quack doctor who used them. With them not being used periodically, it wasn’t seldom to find them covered in dust or eaten by bugs.

And so, this season was the greatest enemy for dried goods. If they are neglected for even a bit, they’ll soon get mouldy.

It wasn’t that Maomao like cleaning.

There were many times she visited the medical office to kill time, she didn’t have a reason to help here either.

But, she can’t not do it.

Fired up with that sense of duty, Maomao brandished the duster.

“Lass, you don’t have to trouble yourself with this. You can just leave the cleaning to someone else.”

Because the dispirited quack doctor said such a thing, she inadvertently looked at him with the eyes she normally faced Jinshi. Putting it simply, it was like she was gazing at a puddle of water teeming with mosquito larvae.

“Eek.”

(Not good, not good.)

Although he was a quack doctor, he was a superior officer. Just in case, officially, she

must not attend to him without sincerity. If not, he might not give out rice crackers the next time she comes in.

The snacks of the inner palace had too many sweet things – getting less salty stuff was not good.

“I’m fine with leaving it to someone else, but what would happen if the medicines get switched with something else?”

“...”

The quack doctor was silenced.

That saying, Maomao coming here now to clean as she pleased was also a problem, but let’s keep silent about that. She won’t get driven out.

Maomao, to clear out the dust, opened up the shelves one by one and wipe down the insides. She threw away the things that had clearly gone off and wrote down their names on wooden slips. She rewrapped the medicines in new wrapping paper and put them back.

(They use such nice paper.)

Paper that can be preserved for long periods of time are expensive. The paper that appeared on the market are inferior goods that are usually discarded soon after being used. On top of its one-time usage, it cannot be preserved either, so it is often the case that the masses opt to use wooden slips entirely. A lot of firewood appear on the market. There are some among those that are chopped thinly for easy kindling. People use those. Those are just used as kindle afterwards.

In the past, they even exported paper to foreign countries, but the previous emperor, no, his mother the empress, had prohibited the felling of lumber that were the raw material for fine quality paper. Currently, the prohibition had been relaxed to a restriction, but even so, the amount wasn’t sufficient.

Why did the empress prohibit the felling of lumber? In those days, it was said the officials who were reckless enough to ask about it were no longer around.

And so, it was still restricted nowadays. *What could the reason be?* Maomao wondered.

Therefore, currently, except for a portion of high-class items, paper was made from

other types of wood, grass and rags. With the quantity not to the extent as lumber, and with the manufacturing also taking time and effort, it was expensive. Consequently, due to the inferior goods from skimping in the manufacturing process, the popularity of paper – being just expensive and unusable – wasn't good in town.

Though paper was more convenient, the rate of circulation being not half was because of the above reasons.

“Fuuu.”

“You done? Lass?”

The quack doctor raised his voice happily at Maomao who took a break.

“No, there's half left.”

“...”

It couldn't be done in a day because of the extensive varieties of medicine. Maomao left the remainder for tomorrow.

The charcoal she brought in was to absorb the moisture in the room. Since that still wasn't enough, she got the quack doctor to order additional stock.

Well then, it was when Maomao was about to leave.

A girl, who was probably around Maomao's age, waited at the front of the medical office. Though she was tall, she had somehow childish features.

(What place's maidservant is this?)

The clothes she wore were simple, but it wasn't something distributed in the inner palace. If that was the case, she decided that she must be working directly under a consort.

At least, it was a face that Maomao has never seen before.

(...mm?)

Maomao looked at the unfamiliar court lady with slightly squinted eyes.

Unexpectedly, the court lady stared back with a head tilt. She feigned ignorance.

(Could it be my imagination? I'm feeling a bit of déjà vu.)

The quack doctor who came out from inside started to jog over with an "Oh?". Then he took out a cloth bag from the top of the shelves in the room and passed it over to the girl who was waiting.

"Thank you very much."

The court lady courteously relayed her thanks. Her voice was somewhat shrill.

The quack doctor waved at the leaving court lady with a smile.

"An acquaintance?"

The quack doctor was the sole medical officer in the inner palace, but he is working and doing nothing.

"Ahh, that child is a court lady from the consort-sama who had come in recently. It seems she knows a little about medicine just like you."

"I see."

Then she doesn't rely on the quack doctor and makes her dose by just bringing back ingredients, Maomao comprehended.

The quack doctor thumped his back tiredly as he rummaged through the shelves to prepare snacks. He poured fruit juice from a ceramic sake bottle and brought it over.

"It's sweet food that's the best when you're tired."

He said, and passed the mashed sweet potatoes he had split with a bamboo spoon and served on paper to Maomao.

(This old man is well to do huh.)

It was the case that he was using sweet potatoes that were unusual that you can't obtain in this season to make mash, but then he served it on fine quality paper instead

of a plate like it was natural.

Maomao picked up the sweet potato mash and ate it up, and gazed at the round grease marks on the paper. Even if the surface was smooth, it was very good paper.

“You use good paper here.”

“Oh, you know?”

She had meant to say it off-handedly, but the quack doctor piped in.

“My family made this. It’s distributed in the imperial court. Isn’t that amazing!”

“It’s amazing.”

This, being served on this here would be because of that.

At any rate, it is not flattery that this is good paper, Maomao thought. The wrapping paper used in Maomao’s pharmacy that she chose to buy each time was relatively decent among the worn inferior goods. She wanted the sort of paper that allowed protection against moisture and spillage, but it can’t be helped considering the quality of customers. She had to cut the cost of things aside from medicine. She’ll lose the means of livelihood otherwise.

(I wonder if I can get a discount as acquaintances.)

Maomao drank the juice as she considered something sneaky. The lukewarm sweetness passed down her throat. *This doesn’t suit my tastes,* she thought, and decided to boil water and brew some tea. Since the medical office always had a fire going, that was convenient.

“We were bunched in villages and made paper. For a period of time, there was also a time where we considered discontinuing our work but it was good since we somehow made a living with it.”

The quack doctor, without her even asking, started his talking piece by piece.

In the past, they earned money by just making paper. That’s why they steadily felled lumber and finely crushed that wood into pulp, and devoted themselves to making

paper. Since it was more profitable to sell to foreign countries than domestically, paper was steadily exported as trade goods. When the quack doctor was a child, he said that they had prospered to the point of being able to buy whatever sweet snacks he wanted.

However, as if that wasn't allowed, they incurred the empress' anger and then could no longer fell lumber for materials. As a last resort, they used different materials to make paper, but those were inferior goods. By even getting the merchants angry, their work came to an end from thereon.

The smooth sailing days they had up until then seemed to change suddenly. The quack doctor said his grandfather, the village chief, *Do something about it*, blamed the earnest villagers.

The village chief believed that it was impossible to make paper as they always did. But, everyone who couldn't take to this reality were not meek, and intently beat down the village chief and his family in their miserable anger.

Maomao listened as she triumphantly poured tea into a bowl.

"I was lonely when my older sister left for the inner palace."

The village was built in a place suitable for making paper, but when they couldn't do that, that place had no use. They were determined to migrate, but the wherewithal was insufficient.

That time, since the inner palace was seeking court ladies, he said his older sister left.

"She said that 'I am going to become the empress dowager' with a smile, but in the end, I couldn't meet her again."

The problem even with a new plot of land was knowing what to do with the equipment. They needed more wherewithal, and then, following the older sister, even the younger sister started to talk about going to the inner palace.

"Since there was nothing we can do, I decided to go."

As the inner palace expanded, the number of eunuchs had to increase. He said that eunuchs which had fewer suitable people were sold for higher than court ladies.

(He had more troubles than I thought.)

As Maomao thought that, she drank up the tea.



They did as much cleaning as they could, to the point where dirty places couldn't be seen. They finished cleaning the shelves on the second day, but the next place of concern was the room next door.

The quack doctor cleaned relatively diligently, but the trivial places didn't reach his eyes. While they were removing the cobweb from the ceiling and thoroughly blowing up the walls, the third day ended, and what followed was the maintenance of the tools.

There were a lot more tools that she had expected. Of all things, it seems the quack doctor locked away all the tools he didn't really use in a single room.

(Just how wasteful is that.)

Thinking that it was clear that the room next door wasn't used at all, Maomao believed that there was a mountain of treasure piled up inside. There were also quite a lot of medical books. Maomao looked pleased, so the quack doctor reluctantly decided to tidy up.

And so, it took seven days since she started cleaning with the pouting quack doctor.

A eunuch came around to the quack doctor who was polishing the mortar² with his brows bent to a \sim shape. Wondering what it was, he received the message.

"Oh, this is-

The quack doctor thought, *I'm going to slack off now*, and cheerily unfolded the letter.

"Who is it from?"

Maomao tried asking, merely for lip service.

"It's from my younger sister."

The quack doctor looked at the rough paper. Maomao thought the surface of the paper

was like laver. It also looked like the inferior goods you see in town.

(If I remember correctly, he said that they made paper.)

Are failed inferior goods good enough to give out since they're relatives, she thought, and—.

“!?”

The quack doctor, his face an expression of surprise, was reading as if he was eating into the page.

Is something up? Maomao stood to his side, and the quack doctor drooped his shoulders, crestfallen. And then, just like that, he slumped on the chair, and while hanging his head, threw the letter on the table.

“We might have to desist from being the purveyor.”

Saying it simply, that was written there.

A few days ago, he was just boasting to Maomao. That his family produced paper for the imperial court.

“How could this be? Even though they said they can now make a lot more paper after so long.”

Whether attached to the name *purveyor* or not, hereafter, the amount sold would change greatly. It was the people of the elite who use high-class paper, they should be weak to the words *purveyor*.

“By saying you made a lot, does it mean you economised the labour?”

While tilting her head, Maomao felt the stiff surface of the paper.

“No such thing. They were worked up saying that they bought cows, so they can use them with the manufacturing. What is different between doing it with manpower to when you are doing it with cows?”

On making paper, there is a lot of work. Even if they switched to cows, what would

come of it?

“But, as far as I can see, I didn’t believe they made something that could be distributed in the imperial court though.”

Maomao fluttered the letter that the quack doctor had received.

Coarse paper would end up ripping from just getting a bit wet. On the contrary, the surface got fluffy, and the brush strokes were extremely hard to read.

“...”

She looked at the quack doctor who sank into silence. It seems he recognised that it was inferior goods.

“...what’s up with that?”

The quack doctor rested his head on the table.

Maomao polished the mortar earnestly, thinking *Now isn’t the time to clean huh*, while she observed the surface of the paper.

The inferior goods that circulate in town had a lot of impurities and are mostly rough with plant fibres. Maybe it was made without being finely pulped, due to that, the glue doesn’t dry properly and crumbles.

However, looking at this, it seems the fibres are crushed evenly. She recognised that the thickness also had no unevenness, and carefully spread and dried. Despite this, the surface was fluffy, and if you pull at the corners it’ll easily be torn.

Maomao reread the letter, her head tilted.

The manufacturing process hasn’t changed from the past, it was written that the materials were properly used as they always did. *What should we do?* It was a message of a younger sister who depended on her older brother, but unfortunately, it seems the older brother who became half a man could only be flustered.

“How was this traditional manufacturing process done?”

Maomao finished polishing the mortar and returned it to the shelf. She lit the kettle to take a break.

“It’s the same technique as to how you make paper normally. Though, our village is particular about the way the materials were crushed and the making of the glue. I won’t say that though.”

(This is where you stop running your mouth huh.)

While Maomao thought, she took out a tea caddy from the shelf. *What tea is good?* She fished around and chanced on arrowroot inside. Maomao took that out and added it to the teacup. She relit the kettle to boil the water again.

“Were you also particular about things like water?”

“Yeah. So that the glue hardens moderately, we draw spring water to properly regulate the temperature. Anything else is a secret.”

He really is a quack doctor, Maomao thought, putting down the teacup once again. She poured in the piping hot water, and before the water cooled she mixed the contents with all her might with the spoon. The gloopy liquid is completed. The arrowroot tea³ is completed.

“Is the glue from boiling rice starch water?”

“No, we make sure to add wheat flour. Since clumping is bad.”

The quack doctor said then held his mouth.

Maomao was fine with either starch water or wheat flour.

Maomao set the arrowroot tea she made before the quack doctor,

“Then, where do you raise the cows?”

she asked.

“I don’t know that much.”

Although the quack doctor made a face as if to say *Why is it arrowroot tea again*, he started to lick the piping hot tea. Since the tea was gooey and highly viscous, it stuck to the teacup and he couldn’t drink it properly.

“Lass, you, mixed up the ratio. You can’t drink it now.”

Maomao passed a spoon over to the protesting quack doctor.

“My apologies. Then, I’ll tell you a way how you can drink it easily, so can you copy me?”

“What do you want me to do?”

Maomao held the spoon she was holding into her mouth and licked it, and thrust that into the teacup and stirred it up. She repeated that several times.

“That’s kinda bad manners.”

Though the quack doctor grimaced, he copied her. As he repeatedly put the spoon in his mouth and mixed with it several times, he noticed a change.

“It’s not gloopy anymore.”

“Told you.”

“It’s like water.”

Maomao said, looking at the face of admiration.

“Arrowroot tea and glue, you know, they are very similar.”

“It’s not that it’s not similar. If you mix it with saliva, glue also stops being gloopy.”

“That’s what it is.”

The quack doctor gaped his mouth in surprise.

“What do you mean, that’s what it is?”

The quack doctor, who was bad at guessing, tilted his head as he mixed the teacup.

(I even told him that much.)

Should I let him guess again, Maomao thought as she, just one more time, decided to teach him.

“Cows, you know. Their mouths collect a lot of saliva, right?”

“Now that you mention it.”

“How about you check where they drink water? Just in case.”

I’m not going to say anymore, Maomao packed away the teacup and decided to hurry up in returning to the Jade Palace.

The quack doctor seemed to have finally realised it. He wrote something on a piece of paper, and hastily left the medical office to send out a message.

(I wonder if we will finish cleaning tomorrow.)

Maomao thought as she sent off the hurrying plump eunuch.

1. Buddhist Term: Means “Possessing happiness” in Sanskrit. The Western Paradise, the western pure land of Amitābha. A ‘pure land’ is the celestial realm of Buddha.
2. 藥研, yagen, druggist’s mortar, back and forth crushing wheel
3. 葛湯, kuzuyu, arrowroot tea or kudzu starch gruel. Arrowroot powder is starchy ground up kudzu/arrowroot. You add hot water and mix it to get this sweet liquid that has a clear honey-like consistency. The powder is also used as a thickening agent in cooking.

CHAPTER 12

CLINIC

"I might be feeling a little sluggish."

Airan said, her eyes partly on the verge of shutting, chin resting on the table.

Maomao placed her hand on her brow. It appears that she has a fever.

They were taking a break in the kitchen, eating snacks. Honnyan, whose duty was to watch over them, wasn't around, so they passed the time in a laid-back manner.

"Don't tell me you have a slight cold or something. What would happen if you pass it over to Consort Gyokuyou and the princess?"

Infa said as she picked up a cherry. The cherries were taken from the inner palace orchard. Just saying this in case, but this wasn't something Maomao took on purpose. Don't take her wrong, she only snuck some in.

"I was careful though."

Airan raised her head tiredly.

Maomao was going to return to her room to boil some cold medicine, but Infa pulled her to a stop.

"Sorry about this, but since you're going to make medicine, can you take her to the clinic?"

"The clinic? You say?"

Maomao tilted her head. Wasn't that, the medical office? *If so, even if I take her there, it'll just tire her out*, Maomao thought, but then Infa, guessing that, shook her head.

"It's different to the medical office. How do I say this? Though we don't have medical officers, we have different people instead? For the time being, Airan knows, so go with

her.”

Maomao nodded, *I understand.*



This so-called clinic was on the north side of the inner palace. It was at a distance from the back of the washing area; there were court ladies wearing white robes.

(It was in such a place.)

It was out of Maomao’s area of activity. *I didn’t know about it*, she muttered, and Airan laughed wryly amid her coughs.

“Probably, you weren’t simply told when you entered here?”

Unfortunately, since Maomao entered here while sulking, she didn’t listen properly. It was likely that, in the middle of being brought here and getting the explanation, she must have been observing the mugwort that was growing on the roadside.

She was that kind of creature.

In the washing area beside it, court ladies were briskly washing clothes. The things they were carrying in their hands seemed to be sheets.

(How reasonable.)

By being close to the washing area, they can immediately wash clothes and futons. For a place where it is important to have the area clean for medical treatment, it was a good location.

“Excuse me. I caught a cold.”

Airan called out to a court lady who was moving quickly. Although the busy-seeming court lady made a brief look of doubt, she set down the washing basket and placed her hand on Airan’s forehead.

“A fever, I see. Stick out your tongue.”

It was a seasoned voice. The court lady's face was covered in deep wrinkles. For the inner palace, an unusual middle-aged court lady.

After the court lady squinted, she lifted Airan's chin up to see. It was a more practised action compared to the quack doctor.

"Hmm. It doesn't seem to be that serious. If you don't exert yourself, you'll be fine in two or three days. What do you want to do?"

The court lady asked Airan. The diagnosis was also reliable.

"I can't pass it over to the consort, so can I stay here? Just in case."

"Hmm."

The court lady picked up the laundry basket and promptly entered the clinic. She set down the basket and beckoned at them.

The inside of the clinic was a simple structure that was devoid of splendour. There were no decorations hanging off the pillars, the corridor had plain timber flooring. Even the windows, the square windows were only just installed at fixed intervals. Because of the lack of decorations, cleaning was easier to do, so they are sufficiently thorough. There were many windows, the ventilation was also good. It seemed to be a very restful place to spend the time in this coming season.

There was no characteristic stench of traditional eastern medicine. However, an alcohol-like stench permeated the air.

Airan grimaced. It appears that the reason she hesitated coming here was because she hated this smell. However, Maomao could only admire that they were attentive with disinfection. Strong alcohol killed toxins when applied on the wound. Needless to say, holding it on the open wound and wiping it down is a method of disinfection.

She had thought it was mysterious before that disease didn't spread with only that quack doctor around. *Turns out there was this kind of place.*

"Then, tell them that I'll come back tomorrow."

"I understand."

Airan received a tag that was made from wood from the middle-aged court lady, and headed to the room of the number written on that tag.

Maomao looked at the inside of the clinic with interest, but she was seized by the nape of her neck.

“Hey, what about your job. Don’t think you could slack off just because you were the chaperon.”

“..”

“What? Or, would you rather, clean all the washing here for us?”

Maomao shook her head in refusal at the aunty who was grinning widely.

Maomao, with nothing she could do, decided to return to the Jade Palace.

The madam was also like that. She really can’t win against old ladies.



(I wanted to see more of it.)

But it didn’t seem like she could do it, so she gave up. She trudged the way back. While Maomao was being carefree, the court ladies carrying laundry baskets scurried around her on the road.

Since it was the rainy season, it seems tough that they have to pack up the washing when the sunniness occasionally abated. That said, Maomao also recalled that she had to go get the washing too.

(At any rate.)

Aside from that aunty, there were several other court ladies. It can be said they were all senior aged.

Since they were in a place called the inner palace, when court ladies age, they are half forced to be replaced. Generally, when they get to their thirties, they are forced to take

breaks. If they remain, they would all be high positioned personnel like the Inner Palace Chief, or a maid that attends a consort.

If she spoke it out loud, she would surely be hit, but Honnyan the head maid was already the age where she would be leaving the inner palace.

Speaking of that court lady's experienced manner, *she must have stayed behind as an existence that the inner palace needed*, Maomao thought.

However, there was one point of concern.

The smell of medicine was non-existent. Could it have been erased by the smell of alcohol?

No, or could it be—.

Maomao walked, stroking her chin as she contemplated, and bumped into something. *Did I hit a pillar?* She thought, but for some reason, there was the face of a celestial maiden that was dazzling like a sun above her head.

"Don't mutter to yourself as you walk. You'll trip."

"What are you talking about?"

Jinshi sighed tremendously and spread both of his hands, shaking his head. At his expression of disappointment, Maomao inadvertently became sullen, and her eyes were like she was looking at a swollen earthworm in a puddle of water, but then she politely met eyes with Gaoshun, who was overflowing with the expression of a *bodhisattva*. For now, she forced her narrowed eyes wide open.

"Where did you go?"

"The clinic. To think there was such a place huh."

"...It was mentioned to court ladies when they were first shown around, could it have been omitted?"

"No, I don't think so."

Looking at Jinshi who had a somewhat strangely serious expression. Maomao thought, *What should I do?* Occasionally, does this eunuch have no confidence in his own work? He has so much confidence normally.

Jinshi slowly veered off to a path that led to a place with few people. The beautiful eunuch, him just standing here will become a hindrance to work, so it would be a welcome decision.

“It was a place that was more established than I thought, so I was surprised. Rather, it would be better if the medical officer was there.”

No, if it was like that, the quack doctor’s head will fly. If it was like this, the places where Maomao can slack off will decrease, so it was troubling.

I really should have corrected what I said just then, she thought, when Jinshi lowered his brows again.

“If there was a medical officer there? Wouldn’t that be a hardship if that was done?”

“What do you mean?”

“Only males can be medical officers, you know.”

Maomao tilted her head, and Gaoshun explained instead.

“Fundamentally, only medical officers can boil medicine. For the treatment of wounds too. Scratches aside, the treatment of serious injuries was impossible. It was banned.”

(Was that how it is?)

Maomao understood. The reason why there wasn’t the smell of medicine, must be due to that.

However, if that was the case.

“What about me?”

Maomao felt that she boiled medicine as she pleased. Of course, she couldn’t bring in ingredients from outside, but she used the plants that grew within the inner palace

and the medical office's medicines.

"You can say our eyes are closed. Among consorts, there aren't few people who know a lot about medicines placed as maids. Though, when it becomes such a case, conversely, their presence becomes too distinct and can't provide medicines then."

From Jinshi's phrasing, *I'm involved in some complicated situation*, Maomao thought. Like the inner palace court lady wage system, an incomprehensible system and law might exist, but Maomao had not much interest in it so she had absolutely no idea.

Even if medicine was not allowed, you can use alcohol to disinfect then – it could be utilised by applying that devising.

By just resting in a clean place, illnesses can be easily cured. In the case where the condition is severe, there was also the means to return to their family.

(What a bother.)

However, it would be more of a bother to overturn the system that was once decided. In this world, there are many people who chose to immobilise.

"Even for the future, it would be good if we can supply more figures that are different to medical officers."

Jinshi also couldn't speak about Maomao. Like he was making a speech, that was a monologue.

"So we can do it even if there aren't eunuchs."

(Eunuch huh.)

Within the inner palace, eunuchs make up about half of all the people. Compared to court ladies, since they aren't often replaced, their average age was considerably high.

(That saying, there aren't many young eunuchs huh.)

She was pretty sure she heard that a couple of years ago, the surgery to become a eunuch was banned. If she remembered correctly, wasn't it the time when the emperor was replaced by the current one?

Maomao didn't know when Jinshi became a eunuch. However, considering Jinshi's age, it could only be just before it was banned.

(Poor thing. If only you waited a little.)

Involuntarily, her gaze dropped. She looked at Jinshi's crotch. Since the eunuch's surgery removed it all by the roots, it becomes flat. Since she knew what happened to her foster father's area, she could pretty much imagine it.

(Smooth and flat.)

Maomao slowly raised her head, locking eyes with Jinshi.

Jinshi was making a somewhat complicated expression. His lips were shut in a zigzag shape; he was staring back at Maomao.

(Don't tell me, did I say it out loud again?)

Not good, she thought, holding her mouth and averting her eyes, this time meeting eyes with Gaoshun. His *bodhisattva* expression had crumbled; it seems he was looking towards Jinshi with the same sympathetic smile as Maomao. Being fellows that had the same flatness, could they have a connection?

Gaoshun slowly shook his head,

"Jinshi-sama, our work is being held up. "

And said a behest.

"Okay. That's right. Tell them that I will be heading to the Jade Palace afterwards."

So Jinshi said, and left with an elegant retreating figure.

Maomao released her hands that she clamped over her mouth,

(If I make a medicine that can grow it, could it be profitable?)

She considered imprudent things along those lines.

CHAPTER 13

TAIL

The next day, together with Airan's return to the Jade Palace, Maomao was summoned by a certain person.

Contrary to who she was thinking, it was the middle-aged court lady who had seized Maomao by the nape yesterday.

"So she said she wanted to meet Maomao."

It was Consort Gyokuyou who spoke to Airan, who had her hand on her chin. They were in the living room; Airan was making an inquiry to the consort. The consort was stretched out on the couch. Her movements had become sluggish with her abdomen substantially bigger. Though she was wearing clothes that veiled her figure, there could be people outside who might have already noticed.

"My apologies. I should've drunk it here."

It seems Airan drank the medicine Maomao made yesterday at the clinic. She said she had been discovered by the court lady and was asked where she got the medicine from.

(Makes sense.)

As there wasn't a medical officer in the clinic, purposely bringing medicine inside, even though the use of medicine there was unpermitted, had to be no good. Being clearly not allowed to take it out, that would also attract the eyes from above.

Maomao wondered if she should promptly leave and get firmly told off, but then unexpected words came.

"It's about whether they can borrow her for a short while."

"Oh my my."

Consort Gyokuyou tilted her head and looked at Maomao.

Airan also looked at Maomao with a troubled expression.

While Maomao found that it had become somewhat bothersome, she thought about new medicinal ingredients for now.



Consequently, it was decided that Maomao, who had come along as an observer before, will head to the clinic. Her chaperone wasn't Airan, it was Infa who followed. She was shorter compared to Airan, but she appeared to be suited with her liveliness and clear-cut personality.

It may still be in the inner palace, but it was quite a trek. The talkable Infa wasn't quiet to the point of being silent during this period.

"Hey, Maomao. Yesterday, after sending Airan off, what were you doing something by the garden lantern?"

"Did you see me?"

It was after returning from the clinic, to be accurate, it was after meeting Jinshi and the others along the way.

"I went for a bit to see if there were ingredients for medicine."

The lantern is lit when it got dark. In doing so, bugs will gather at that light. The creature she was targeting will approach.

"Something you're looking for? It's not a bug or something, right?"

"It's not a bug."

It certainly wasn't a bug, but Infa's expression shifted, sniffing out an unpleasant premonition.

"Maomao, your room, recently, has too many things. Since the smell of medicine has kinda gotten intense, Honnyan-sama's eyes are raised up."

"That's scary."

“It doesn’t look that scary though.”

No way, Maomao thought. That head maid was very quick to act. However, if she wasn’t that strong-willed, she couldn’t be able to get on in the inner palace.

“Sooner or later, Maomao might get driven out from your room and get put in the storage shed next door.”

Infa said, smiling widely.

“That would be nice.”

That storage shed was bigger than her current room, and above all, since it was distanced from everyone’s sleeping quarters, sounds wouldn’t escape in the middle of the night. Even though she took all the trouble of getting a lot of unused tools from the medical office, she was feeling gloomy that couldn’t use it here.

“Then, sometime as soon as we get back, I’ll have Honnyan-sama sound it out.”

Maomao’s eyes shone.

“Eh, wait. Um...”

Infa panicked and was going to say something to Maomao when they arrived at the clinic.

“Well then, shall we enter for now?”

“That just then, wai-wait—”

If Maomao moved to the shed, while considering that she might even be able to do work that used fire, her hope grew.



The middle-aged court lady was called Shenryu¹. Maomao, looking really closely, saw that her eyes were the same green as Consort Gyokuyou’s. She might be mixed with western blood.

Maomao was shown into a place that seemed like the parlour of the clinic. It must have been originally a remodelled building of old consorts. Although it was devoid of pointless ornaments, the building itself wasn't changed that much.

In the room that had the faint smell of alcohol, Shenryu took out tea for them. The table was plain, the shelves and chairs around it were also sturdy, but they look like they have used for a long time.

"I was utterly ignorant that you were the Noble Consort's people. I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

The other maids aside, Maomao's upbringing wasn't that good. For starters, she was in a position that was beyond her station. There were many times Consort Gyokuyou was called by her official title by maids aside from the Jade Palace ones.

Shenryu's voice was calm. There was no hint of the gutsy aunty who was carrying a large batch of washing from some time ago. She looks like she had properly received the education of an inner palace court lady.

(She really is a clever person.)

Though they were known as inner palace court ladies, there were also those who couldn't read nor write. Such that, those who remain the inner palace for a long time had to be the clever ones. Otherwise, it could be that they have a special reason.

Perhaps she was talking to the maids from Consort Gyokuyou's place, Shenryu's expression seemed slightly shadowed.

Thinking it as special treatment, Maomao felt there was something wrong. There was a tendency where many close their eyes concerning high ranked consorts and their maids. Despite this, where Shenryu began dealing with them by calling them out was concerned, even the person herself must feel uncomfortable.

However, Shenryu sighed deeply and looked straight ahead.

"There's something I wish to ask of you."

"What would that be?"

Maomao had said it nonchalantly, but Shenryu displayed a momentary look of surprise. However, she righted her expression and continued speaking.

“You might feel it’s impolite, but would that be alright?”

“Go ahead.”

She was used to being treated rudely by others. Rather, she didn’t not consider that it was herself that did something wrong. And so, Maomao had confidence on the general idea of what the person was going to say.

“Then, even if I ask you to make medicine for a court lady from the Able Consort’s place?”

“Wha-!?”

It was Infa who reacted, not Maomao. So that she could slap the table, her body was pitched forward. The tea in the bowls shook, splashes making black stains.

“What you’re insinuating, do you understand!”

Infa said to Shenryu.

Shenryu sighed again,

“I understand deeply.”

She said, focusing on them.

Shenryu didn’t seem to be joking. *What could the reason be?* Maomao thought.

“You seem to have a reason.”

“Maomao!”

“Excuse me, would it be possible if you can just listen to what I have to say?”

Infa sat down, her brows lowered. She gulped down the cooled tea, calming herself

down.

“Will you listen to the situation?”

“I understand.”

Shenryu began to string her story together.



“It became such a bothersome thing huh.”

Infa said, her shoulders unusually drooped.

“I suppose so.”

Once again, Maomao heard something she thought was a pain but couldn’t disregard.

The Able Consort, namely Consort Rifa’s maidservant had been inflicted with a serious illness.

And that, it seems that sick person was still in the Crystal Palace.

Being a maidservant who came to wash in the north washing area since before, Shenryu said the person in question was an acquaintance of hers. She said since the person had a strange cough for a while back, she once told her it was better if she took a proper rest, but after that, it has been five days since she stopped coming here.

Her washing place might have changed, or the washing duty might have changed, she said, though she shook her head.

“Whatever the case, I think it’s better to take a look once.”

And that was what Shenryu had said.

She said she was coughing, and that it seemed to a strange cough.

(Cough huh.)

It had been several days she hadn’t come since she had started to cough, and before

that, she continued having a sense of fatigue and fever.

When she asked if she properly went to the clinic, she got nothing. She was told that permission wasn't given.

(That place is in the wrong.)

It was likely with the level of a maidservant, it would have to be Consort Rifa where they ask for permission. It was highly possible that some maid would ignore that kind of maidservant's words.

And then—.

Connecting the symptoms, Maomao ran into an unpleasant premonition.

“Even so, would she really be there? That child.”

“I think we need to investigate.”

Hypothetically, if that was true, she must be treated properly. It is possible that it would expand to an issue that affected not just the Crystal Palace.

Infa stared at Maomao.

“I know you have that kind of curious character, but the place is the place. You should know properly from the inquiry on what you should say. Occasionally rushing headlong into things is not good.”

“...Okay.”

While it was true that she somewhat an affinity with Consort Rifa, she cannot just thoughtlessly go to her palace. She made too much of a blunder a couple of days ago. First of all, she wasn't acting for Jinshi. The talk would not go ahead.

She wanted to go immediately, but she was unable to have her way with it.

(Even if I'm impatient, there's nothing I can do.)

Maomao considered other things – it was the time to slightly take her mind of it.

Something came out in her range of vision.

Maomao inadvertently took off, running for that thing. She leapt onto the ground like a frog and finally caught it.

“Maomao! What are you doing after talking?”

Holding onto her sleeves, Infa came closer.

Though Maomao made a slightly bitter expression, she stood up, feeling the thing between her palms.

“My apologies. I saw something I was looking for, so I just-”

“Was the thing you’re looking for the usual bug? Stop that.”

“It’s not a bug.”

It wasn’t a bug.

And it wasn’t the real body either.

Unfortunately, the real body had escaped, but the thing Maomao wanted, for now, was moving in her hands.

“Here.”

She opened her hands, there was a lizard’s tail that was still lively hopping around. The lizard’s tail was still alive even if it had come off. That was the key.

(I can’t give up with nothing.)

It was the end when you give up, some sage must have said it. To create a yet unknown medicine, you begin by investigating something that had a similar property first of all.

That’s why, Maomao aimed for the moths that gathered at the garden lantern, and checked to see whether lizards were living there.

“For now, I want to investigate why the tail is alive.”

Though Maomao had said it slightly happily, she didn’t get a reply.

Seeing the front, Infa, whose face had paled, gapped her mouth in shock. And then, just like that, she collapsed backwards.

Maomao wrapped the tail she caught in a towel and put it in her bosom, and ended up looking after Infa who had fainted.

1. 深緑, shen1 lü4 in Chinese. Means 'deep green'.

CHAPTER 14

SHIN (1)

Her surroundings were astir.

Wondering what was up, she walked over towards the entrance hall of the palace. The court ladies were already gathered at the extravagantly built entrance hall. There were also maidservants who had stood up with dust clothes in their hands, their wiping of the handrails forgotten.

“What business you have here after all this time?”

A court lady said, her brows knitted. Her gaze was in the direction of the sole medical officer of the inner palace.

Unusual.

That medical officer does his utmost to never leave the medical office. Hasn't it already been close to a year since he appeared in this palace?

The incompetent medical officer only in name, after the death of the infant crown prince, hadn't dared to come here out of awkwardness. It was only with the reason that there was no replacement, that he could continue to remain in the garden of women carefreely without blame.

What could his business possibly be after all this time?

The medical officer was carrying a wrapping cloth sack with pomp. A court lady trailed behind him.

The court lady was slim. She followed the medical office with smooth, graceful movements. Her tightly closed lips were painted with crimson rouge, and her cheeks were also lightly dusted with peach coloured powder.

Was there such a court lady?

She suddenly thought that. She wondered if it was normal for eunuchs to have assistants similarly seeing as how the medical officer eunuch had one? But it shouldn't

be the case?

No, the inner palace has two thousand court ladies. It wouldn't be strange to have one or two unknown faces.

Everyone, was in the middle of whispering amongst themselves, so she had no choice but to come out in front.

"What is your business?"

Noticing her voice, the chatting court ladies stopped. She didn't miss the maidservants who returned to their original stations in a fluster. To say nothing of the entirety of the inner palace, those who serve in this palace understand.

This was her own, Shin's¹, job.

When Rifa was decided as consort, she entered court along with her. They came to attain the emperor's favour.

"I want an audience with the Able Consort."

Shin squinted at the medical officer's words. She didn't want to hear the words "Able Consort" from the mouth of this man.

"My apologies. I don't believe Rifa-sama would wish to grant an audience with you."

When she gently but clearly voiced the refusal, the thin moustached medical officer lowered his brows. He seems to be a eunuch who had already lost the function of a man – a pitiful moustache. It was a world of difference to the emperor who sported a beautiful, splendid beard.

The medical officer made a troubled expression and looked back. The court lady, whose face was like a Noh mask, quietly whispered into his ear.

The medical officer reluctantly took out something from his breast pocket.

"I received this kind of note."

He unfolded the note that was written on parchment. It was written stating to let this

medical officer in. The name noted at the end was “Jinshi”.

That beautiful eunuch, the mention of him in this inner palace first brought the personage to mind.

He possessed the beauty that could topple countries if he were a woman, but he wasn't a woman. Nor was he a man.

It was certainly true that he was a personage that also made Shin involuntarily leak a sigh. But unlike the other court ladies, she didn't have anything beyond those feelings. Why did Shin come to the inner palace? When she considered that, she didn't have the free time to get preoccupied with a eunuch.

It was important for her to gain the emperor's favour even for the sake of the clan. That, was something Shin and Rifa were told when they were young.

Shin's mother, was Rifa's father's older sister. Because she was the same age as Rifa, she entered court, and had the position of managing the Crystal Palace they currently reside in.

The maids of the Crystal Palace, all of them, were the daughters of distinguished families and had the suitable pedigree to serve the emperor.

“...I understand.”

It cannot be helped that Shin doesn't understand, she decided to guide them inside. She could have entrusted this to other court ladies, but if the medical officer came here under the command of the one who controls the inner palace, the situation was different.

What could this be about?

If the medical officer comes to a consort's palace, it would be when the consort's health was bad.

There's no such manner.

There's no way Shin wouldn't notice, being the one always close to Rifa. Her condition was good today, she even ate her breakfast.

What could this be about? She tilted her head. She couldn't hear footsteps behind her. Shin turned back, and the medical officer and his companion had halted their steps.

They were looking at the shed on the other side of the garden. Rifa's room was far away. It was in the innermost chamber of the palace on the highest storey. This was one of the storage sheds along the way to get there.

"What is it?"

"No, I was wondering what shed that was."

"It's a normal storage shed."

She wanted to lead them there quickly. *Why is he asking about something like this,* Shin thought.

The Crystal Palace was extensively reconstructed into a place fit to raise the crown prince. It wasn't strange if there was a shed or a detached bathroom even. Moreover, the strange, freckled lass came last year and made a strange thing as a bathroom for some reason. It was called a sauna – Shin didn't really like it, Rifa used it occasionally is all.

Though she had said it was a normal shed, the other court lady was staring at it for some reason. Was there something interesting about it? There were just yellow flowers in pots by the window. It shouldn't be that peculiar of a place.

It's only a storage shed. They should quickly go.

The court lady grabbed the eunuch's sleeve and furtively whispered something. The eunuch, once again, lowered his brows, and said to Shin.

"Recently, has this garden been disturbed?"

"No, there is only just the usual gardener who we entrust it to."

"Is that so."

Huh, Shin thought. *That saying, was there that kind of tree?*
Did the gardener grow it without her being aware of it?

“ .. ”

The eunuch kept silent, and the court lady nudged the eunuch again.

The eunuch puffed out his cheeks, easy to understand. But the court lady's expression was unchanged, turning to face Shin.

Black eyes stared at Shin. Shin, saying nothing, was going to slowly avert her eyes when

“You, are wearing perfume today.”

It was a voice she recognised from somewhere.

The voice came from the lips of the graceful court lady.

The court lady's curved into a smirk. This so-called smile was extremely wicked, it was a ferocious way of smiling, as if the moment a beast has sighted its prey.

“ .. ”

“Long time no see. Shin-sama, excuse me for the other day.”

A face caked with plenty of face powder, eyes lined precisely, and excessively long eyelashes loomed towards her.

Though those eyes were inclined to the gaudy decorations, the contours of the face were round and young.

She recognised the sanpaku² eyes that stared at her.

Shin's entire body froze. She understood through her experience that she was substantially worthless in regards to this person.

Last year, this girl turned up at the Crystal Palace. She constantly attended to Rifa and nursed her, but all throughout that, she did astounding things many times over. Due to that, half of the court ladies of this palace couldn't defy this girl.

Shin was in the remaining half who wasn't like that, but she was suddenly stripped by this girl who turned up a couple of days ago.

And because of that, this was a person she really didn't want to deal with.

The girl stared at Shin. Shin found herself retreating slowly.
It was that moment.

The eunuch suddenly dashed towards the garden. The place he was somehow running towards with his plump body was that storage shed.

Shin was going to chase after him, but before her eyes was the lass she was weak towards. Still, she pushed her aside, and chased after the eunuch, but she was already too late.

Holding the door bar, with a look of mute amazement, the eunuch stood.

A peculiar scent wafted out of the opened door. It was the smell that Rifa gave off before, the stink of a sick person who was heading to the other world.

Perhaps the girl had fallen on her buttocks when Shin pushed her aside, she was rubbing her backside. But she didn't look like she was in a hurry either. She only knitted her brows and grabbed the sack the eunuch had brought.

"Uncle! Hot water! Please boil some water!"

She said, without whispering into his ears this time, and entered the shed with the shrouded atmosphere.

There was a crude bed of piled woven mats. A sick person lying down on it. It was the maidservant who served as a laundry woman.

"Gotcha. Lass."

The eunuch ran off again, the fat on his chin swinging.

The girl, as she got the maidservant to drink something that seemed like water, looked at Shin.

"Why are you giving her this kind of treatment?"

"Even when you ask why, there's nothing to it. Isn't it common sense to quarantine her so the disease doesn't spread?"

The girl said nothing in return. She must have something to say, but couldn't say anything.

"I guess so. But."

The girl held a towel over the mouth of the maidservant who was coughing strangely. When she removed it, there were red markings on it.

"This is a contagious disease. The infectiousness may be low, but if you continue to treat her this way, it will result in death. Of course, it is a trivial problem even if a single maidservant dies though."

The girl set down the sick maidservant and tried to enter the shed again. Shin involuntarily grabbed the girl's shoulders to stop her, but she smoothly shook her off and went inside.

Stop. The inside has-

She was going to stop the girl while her foot was caught on the baggage, but it was already too late.

The girl had something in her hands. It was a small box.

"When I entered this room, I recalled that time. The time when Consort Rifa hid her illness."

"What about it?"

"She was covered in perfume to hide the characteristic stink of a sick person."

And what about it? *Hurry up and return that*, Shin stretched out her hand.

"I had the same feeling when I entered here. I'm against it this time though."

The girl opened the small box. There were rows of small colourful bottles.

"To hide the smell of perfume, it looked like the sick person had put it. "

The girl pulled off the stopper of a small bottle with a pop. Her nose twitched.

“The maids of the Crystal Palace, truly have a lot of things hidden. The poor eunuch will get whipped again.”

It was a bottle of perfume oil that the girl opened. It was a product that was obtained from the merchants a couple of days ago. They were things that the mostly recovered by the eunuchs.

“Each one is a small poison. I wonder what would happen if we mixed them.”

The girl laughed like she was singing a nursery rhyme, her eyes squinted in delight.

1. 杏, Xing in Chinese. Apricot.
2. 三白眼, *three whites eyes*. Eyes where the whites below or above the pupil are visible.

CHAPTER 15

SHIN (2)

Now then, I wonder what will happen, Maomao thought as she wiped her face with a towel.

The face powder was gross. The rouge hardly came off, and she really needed to go wash her hair that had clumped up from the perfume oil properly afterwards. She had glued hair trimmings around her eyes – a technique used by prostitutes with thin lashes – but she was worried it won't come off.

The skirt she wore was longer than usual, and she had worn heavy shoes underneath to fake her height. She probably didn't need it though. The lot at the Crystal Palace hadn't noticed it at all.

Though Maomao was sulking about it, she took off the false bottom shoes. She also changed out of her outfit. Some sputum got caught on her clothes when she was nursing the severely sick person a while ago. She was relieved there wasn't blood in it. The infectiousness might be low, but she considered what could happen if she walked around with it, and thus prepared for a change of clothes. With it prepared at the Crystal Palace, the maid attire was pretty much lacking in function, but there was nothing she could do about it. She really wanted to take a bath, but it couldn't be done now so she relented.

When she tidied up, Maomao headed to the room where everyone was waiting for her.



Everyone was gathered in the parlour of the Crystal Palace, their expressions clouded with anxiety. Their gorgeous faces were all well-suited to the various fixtures of the room, but when Maomao entered with her make-up off, she couldn't help feeling she was somehow beyond her station.

There was Consort Rifa, Jinshi, Gaoshun, as well as a woman with a lithe beauty. The other maids had withdrawn from the room at Consort Rifa's behest. The quack doctor seemed to be among that group as well, but since he had other business, he took

priority over that.

Consort Rifa's head maid was a woman called Shin. Consort Rifa's cousin, and as a person who also had a noble lineage, she was a proud beauty who stood out even in the inner palace. Perhaps due to their relation, she somehow resembled Consort Rifa in looks.

She was the head maid. But considering her social status, she was in a position where it wouldn't be strange for her to be middle-ranked consort either.

(I wonder if she's challenging as a head maid.)

The ones vying for the emperor's favour weren't all consorts. Sometimes even a maidservant can win the emperor's favour and become the empress dowager. It wasn't something absent in history.

If that was the case, wouldn't gathering beautiful flowers in the one place make them stand out more?

The maid who serves the high-rank consort becomes a mistress. That moment, the maid would immediately be appointed a rank so that her social status is appropriate to become a consort.

(What is it like for the people in question?)

Maomao didn't know anything concerning Consort Rifa's family. Just that complex emotions would be revolving around the people in question. If they could overcome that and cover it with deep trust, the world will be at peace.

(Consort Gyokuyou is blessed.)

The head maid Honnyan wasn't a capable person who was sent in as help. She was only working as a maid for Consort Gyokuyou. Due to that, she passed her marriageable age. It would be nice if Consort Gyokuyou would mediate a good family for her to marry into one day, though.

Even the other maids. They all have certainly lovely features, but they wouldn't even consider something outrageous like obtaining the emperor's favour.

On the flipside, speaking of Consort Rifa's maid here—.

“What is this supposed to mean?”

Jinshi slapped the table, his eyes narrowed. There were several varieties of perfume oil and spices on it.

These were the things that were found a while ago in the storage room with the sick person. They wouldn't stand out as individual pieces, but when several types get mixed, the smell of stuffy.

The rest of the perfume was wafting around the head maid called Shin.
Even though the smell of the perfume wasn't on the head maid at all before.

With the stink of perfume being not there as the reason, she must have confiscated something else she bought with the other maids. Even if it wasn't the case, she might have properly kept it hidden away.

“..”

Shin closed her eyes, saying nothing.

(Is she keeping quiet?)

Her crime, at the same time as concealing the perfume and spice that had been banned, was on how she attempted to use those products to make something.

She shouldn't be charged with the crime of quarantining the maidservant in the shed. Moving her from the common room to prevent infection was an appropriate measure. The inner palace only has a single medical officer; it would be hopeless in the first place to have him look after the maidservant.

(It became the place for the eunuch with too much free time to drink tea though.)

Even if she was taken to the medical clinic, it doesn't mean that they could be entrusted with the maidservant. There were also those who hate getting medical treatment from women.

However, it was troubling if a person dies because of that reason, but it couldn't be helped.

Just that, the lives of maidservants are insignificant.

Jinshi was also thrust before the pieces of evidence and charged her the crime that she was accused of based on that.

However, the head maid called Shin simply stood there, making an oblivious face. She had a noble lineage from the start. The eunuch called Jinshi might only have the position where he could just phrase a complaint no matter what he wanted to say.

And the mysterious one was Consort Rifa.

Her brows were lowered. She was just looking at her head maid. Her face was an expression of sorrow.

Shin looked directly at the eunuch who was inquiring her without lowering her head.

(Hoho, she's playing it quite well.)

The usual court lady would end up staggering just by being cross-examined by Jinshi. It seems he cannot use his *ayakashi*-like ability with this court lady either.

"I don't know anything. Certainly, it was I who said to move the maidservant there. Apart from that, after suddenly turning up and asking to meet Rifa-sama, isn't her actions of looking through the shed more of an issue? "

She said it succinctly. It was certainly true that they can not prove that the things in the shed were Shin's.

Being the place with a sick person, the only contact everyone had to the shed only amounted to carrying her meals there, but conversely, it was a place where it wouldn't be strange if anyone entered.

"In that case, it would be better if we asked the maidservant who was in that place."

"How far can we trust the words of a maidservant who was mindless from fever?"

"You knew that she was feverish huh."

Maomao said without a moment of delay.

Shin's demeanour changed instantly.

“How gracious of you. To go out of your way to see a lowly maidservant’s condition.”

Maomao added brazenly.

“In that case, it wouldn’t be strange to have the smell of perfume oil remain of your body.”

Maomao picked out a small bottle from the table.

(No, I’m obtruding too much if I do any more than this.)

She thought, but her body moved. She couldn’t help it out of aggravation. Over her own position and all that, she was annoyed.

“You smell just like this perfume oil. Despite you saying that this bottle was carefully placed inside the baggage. It is a smell that is so strong that it seeps out? Just in case, can you allow me to check?”

Maomao was going to grab onto Shin’s sleeves, but Shin pushed her away. That moment, nails gouged across Maomao’s cheeks. They were long nails.

Amidst the commotion around her, Maomao rubbed the gash with her thumb. There wasn’t a lot of blood. Only a thin layer of skin was taken off.

“My apologies. Someone of my position shouldn’t have touched you. Shall we get someone else to examine you instead?”

She said it casually as all of the gazes in the room gathered onto Shin.

Shin, whose lips were twisted into a jagged shape, whose eyes were bloodshot. The unpleasant smell of sweat hung in the air. Her pupils were dilated.

People sweat when they are nervous. The glistening sweat was different to the perspiration from strenuous activity. The sweat was disgusting, the smell intense.

Eyes were the same. Though not as easily understood as a cat’s, the pupils of human eyes also change. Consort Gyokuyou with her pale eyes was more easily understood than others because of that, so when she held tea parties with other consorts, there were many times where she smiled with her pale eyes closed.

(One more effort.)

It was what Maomao had prepared one step in advance.

“For this part, can you leave it to me?”

She heard a voice that was prideful but not arrogant.

Consort Rifa who was sitting on the couch stood up. As she fingered her long skirt, she approached Maomao, no, Shin.

(Oh?)

The outfit that Consort Rifa was wearing looked very similar to the design that Consort Gyokuyou was wearing recently. It wasn't a problem, considering that it was purchased when the caravans came.

“What will be this person's charge?”

“Rifa-sama...”

Shin said. Her eyes were filled with various emotions, but for some reason, there were no signs of a questioning in her gaze.

“For argument's sake, if she was making an abortion drug, it is the same as killing the emperor's children.”

As if she would understand by just saying that, Jinshi closed his eyes.

“Is that so. Does that apply to any consort?”

“It is the same for high-rank consorts and low-rank consorts.”

Consort Rifa covered her eyes, and looked at Shin,

(That saying.)

‘Rifa’ and ‘Shin’. They were names of a set.

Maomao suddenly thought.

She didn't think that this head maid called Shin was dumb. Just that there were millions of people in this world who are foolish even when they are smart. Most of these were actions controlled by emotions.

Maomao thought about Shin and one other person.

And then, the one who put out the conclusion was Consort Rifa.

"Even if the target was just myself?"

"Consort! That is!"

Jinshi leaned forward.

Gaoshun also widened his eyes.

With the one line from Consort Rifa, it was Maomao who understood.

She had thought it was strange the whole time.

The resources Consort Rifa had as a consort were sufficient. And yet, she had always thought that the other woman couldn't find decent maids.

It wasn't the case.

It was the maids of the Crystal Palace who gathered up these type of people, and the one who gathered them was Shin here.

Previously, during the incident with the poisonous face powder, a single maid who was forced to resign. However, what about the other ones who were there? They continued working carefreely.

And then, speaking of Consort Rifa in response to this head maid...

"Shin, even once, you never treated me as a 'consort'. You must be thinking that I wasn't suitable as the empress dowager."

Maomao understood what Consort Rifa was saying. Shin never called her "Consort" even once.

“You and I, we never understood who will become the consort till the end.”

Consort Rifa’s voice was sad.

Consort Rifa had feelings towards Shin. However, what about Shin? The woman was biting her lips, facing Consort Rifa was a look of hatred.

“...what eyes from above are you speaking as?”

A voice of scorn leaked out from the lips of the head maid.

“That part of you, I hated from a long time ago. *I* was better at studying than you. Even on a whole lot of other things, *I* surpassed you, and yet why was everyone around us-

(The size of the chest though.)

Maomao was ashamed of herself for thinking that. Even though Shin was pretty big herself.

“Because you were the clan head’s daughter? *I* was lower than you? There’s no way. It was *I* who was raised to become the empress dowager since *forever*.”

Shin bared her wolf-like fangs. Maomao thought it wouldn’t be strange if she sprang upon the consort at any time now, and promptly headed to the front of Consort Rifa, but Gaoshun and Jinshi had already entered the space.

“Can I take that as a confession?”

In response to Jinshi’s question, Shin picked up the bottle of perfume oil on the table and threw it towards Consort Rifa. Gaoshun swept his hand, the small bottle smashed onto the floor.

“You should wither in the flower garden as a barren woman.”

Gaoshun grabbed the hands of Shin who sounded like she was laying down a curse and pinned her back.

“Unhand me, you likes of a eunuch! Such filth!”

Shin struggled but she couldn't win against a man though he was a eunuch.
Filthy language steadily rushed out from her noble lips.

(It exists huh, these type of people.)

Maomao stood in front of Shin, who took a breather after finishing her spiel, and smirked.

"What the hell do you want!"

"No, it's nothing. It just seems like that Shin-sama yearns for the emperor very much."

"No shit! What are you spewing!"

"No, I can surely see that you love the position of the empress dowager. Unlike Consort Rifa."

Maomao once again smiled with her teeth. Shin's mouth gaped open in shock.

What Consort Rifa had, that Shin did not.
That much was clear.

"Shin, so you thought this way."

Consort Rifa said, in a dignified poise despite her trembling eyes.
And then, she stood before Shin, raised her hand high overhead, and slapped Shin's cheeks.

(Oh my, she's that angry.)

Maomao thought in such a way, and Consort Rifa then said something outside her expectation.

"Jinshi-dono, I'm dismissing this head maid. She spat out abusive words towards her master. To the point of me raising my hand."

Jinshi gaped his mouth in surprise.

“Consort, that is...”

“A palm isn’t enough, is it.”

Consort Rifa seized the collar of Shin, who was distracted from her cheeks being slapped, and used a fist this time.

Jinshi and Gaoshun went to stop her in a panic. Only Maomao involuntarily burst out laughing.

(Good work.)

Consort Rifa wasn’t the same consort from long ago. She wasn’t the fickle woman who held onto her own wasted thread of life.

“I dismiss this one. And also, hereafter with no exception, I want to ban her from entering the inner palace.”

Consort Rifa declared with dignity.
Shin was distracted from being beaten up.

This woman should know how kind she was. She shouldn’t resent her in return.

(No, it doesn’t matter either way.)

It didn’t matter how noble a lineage she had, a woman who was expelled from the inner palace due to a scandal had no way of giving retribution to a consort. Maomao thought that was still a generous measure, but this kind of treatment for a prideful woman, being how humiliated she would be, she considered just that.

Shin was lead out of the room by Gaoshun just like that.

There were observers gathered outside the room, wondering what’s going on, but when Maomao glared at them, they scattered like spiderlings.

(Will it be fine, this palace?)

Maomao though that, and then saw large fingers before her eyes.
Maomao unconsciously retreated half a step.

“What are you doing? All of a sudden.”

The owner of the fingers was Jinshi.

“...the wound, treat it.”

Jinshi made a sulky expression and held out a towel to Maomao.

Maomao finally recalled that her cheek had been scratched.

(The wound isn't that serious.)

The towel that Jinshi handed to her was a first-class item that was imbued with incense.

Maomao squinted. It was wasteful to get blood on it. So she wiped her face with her own towel she had put in her bosom. Normally, she should give it back, but since Jinshi was stingy, it was fine for her to think that he gave it to her. *Who can I sell this to later*, Maomao wondered.

(For now, has it been resolved?)

Though Maomao thought that, she looked by the window of the room.

The consort with a beauty that was like a large rose was gazing out the window.

It goes without saying who was there.



“Can I ask one thing?”

“What is it?”

Jinshi said as he walked along the corridor of the Crystal Palace. The direction of his gaze was the storage room where the maidservant was locked up in.

“You knew where the sick person was immediately since you were at the Crystal Palace many times. It wouldn't be strange, with you having visited many times, and yet you came here specifically in a disguise.”

That's right. Donning that outfit was also a consideration to stand out so she could break Maomao's face at the Crystal Palace. She would be basked in attention either way as the court lady who was following the medical officer, but she would be judged more with her own face.

The maidservants of the Crystal Palace were tight-lipped. She understood that the higher maids probably forbid them to speak.

"I found it immediately."

Maomao had already decided on the kind of place. She figured it was a place that was slightly distanced from the maidservants' sleeping quarters, otherwise, it would be in an inconspicuous place.

She gave consideration from the time she was there, unwell maidservants changed their beds to not pass the disease. That exclusive place was also inside the court.

(To think it was the storage shed.)

She had a strange feeling from the smell that was emanating from Shin, but she didn't think it would be something like that.

It was by chance that she found that.

"It's that."

Maomao pointed towards where the flowers were growing. They were white-powder flowers¹. As if it was transplanted not too long ago, the colour of the soil there was different. For a gardener's job, it was poorly positioned. It was right next to the storage shed.

It had black coloured berries, and inside of those were a white powder that becomes face powder.

"Why those?"

"It seems that in *Fengshui*, green things are good for health. I had heard that it is good to put it together with white."

The blooming flowers were all white. Though the name was white-powder flower, the

flowers were mostly red. She noticed that white flowers were specifically chosen from the stock and transplanted.

Certainly, it wasn't in the Crystal Palace in the beginning. It must be blooming somewhere in the inner palace.

She didn't know who transplanted them. Just that, they did that with the sick person in mind. There are people like that. Considering that, Maomao felt somehow relieved.

(At any rate, white-powder flower is-)

Maomao thought it was ironic when she considered the things that were found with the sick person.

She sighed tremendously, but she noticed someone's gaze then.

Suddenly, when she looked back, there was someone looking this way with their body half-hidden behind the pillar.

"What?"

Jinshi looked at Maomao who had halted.

The person who was hiding behind a pillar was slowly swaying and making a face like she was affected by someone.

"Jinshi-sama, please go on ahead."

"Why?"

"You are a hindrance."

Maomao said starkly, and Jinshi made a somehow sullen expression. For that, Gaoshun, who had returned, will talk to him for her in a way that will pacify even a cow.

It truly is nice to be able to read the atmosphere, Maomao put her hands together in thanks to Gaoshun.

"What is it?"

Maomao looked at the girl who was hidden behind the pillar. She looked older than

Maomao, but she was somehow cowering. Whether that, was in response to Maomao, or she did that to other people as well, she didn't know.

"Ah, um. About the person who was over there."

There were fresh white flowers in the girl's hand. Green and white, distinct colours. She spoke clumsily and she cowered, but her nature wasn't bad.

"No longer here. She will be leaving the inner palace, but she can get treatment in an environment that is better than here."

"...so she's leaving."

The maidservant covered her face, but on the hand, it would seem that she was relieved.

The girl rubbed her face like she was hiding her moist eyes. She bowed her head at Maomao and returned to her work post.

Small white flower petals fell in the wake of the girl's leaving.

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1. 白粉花, *Mirabilis Jalapa*. Four o' clock flower is one of its names in English. In Japanese, it is called the face-powder/white-powder flower because of the white powder that is found in its black coloured berries that can be used as face powder.

CHAPTER 16

INSECT LOVER

Maomao was overjoyed.
Really overjoyed.

There was Honnyan in an imposing stance and a narrow-eyed Infa right behind her.

“You really mean that I can use this?”

Maomao peeked at Honnyan’s expression.

“Yes. Go reflect.”

Hmph, Honnyan scoffed, and Maomao’s eyes teared up a little in response. She grabbed hold of Honnyan’s hand delicately and-

“Thank you very much.”

She said her thanks, bowing her head deeply.

“Eh?”

“Wai-, Maomao!?”

While Honnyan and Infa were caught in bewilderment, Maomao triumphantly rushed inside the storage shed.

From today onwards, this will be Maomao’s room.



“Isn’t that just really mean, Infa?”

Guien said as she poured tea. This quiet maid gave out tea and snacks to Infa.

“I don’t think so. Maomao was in the wrong.”

Infa pouted as she sipped her head. Today’s tea was a fermented tea that was ordered from the West. It had a sweet aroma.

“I mean, no matter how many times I told her, she didn’t stop. Maomao was in the wrong. She was gathering bugs again.”

Infa glared at Maomao with narrowed eyes.

Maomao tilted her head in surprise.

As it was actually troubling to have her collapse, Maomao had stopped gathering lizard tails.

“What is that supposed to mean? Never before have I done such a thing.”

Maomao regard Infa with a look of utter mystification.

“I mean, I heard the story of a high-rank consort’s court lady who was catching bugs while laughing in the garden.”

“...”

Guien’s eyes also shifted into a stare.

What is this about? This is a misunderstanding.

“I don’t do such things.”

Maomao said resolutely.

“If I did something, it is when I’m gathering herbs, not bugs.”

“So you claim that you laugh.”

The shocked faces of Infa and Guien.

The two people, who seemed to have finally grasped Maomao’s nature recently, stared at Maomao.

(Mmm.)

These were the faces of no trust.

There isn't. Just because Maomao laughs when she finds medicinal herbs, doesn't mean that she would laugh when she finds bugs. Just in case, it was common sense even for Maomao. She pretty much knows what will happen if she caught bugs and raised them. This season was summer. What kind of a disaster would it become?

Maomao knitted her brows tightly and made a fist.
This was a grave situation.



“Hweehhh? Weird resent fings?”

Shaoran mumbled as she ate a peach steamed bun.

Maomao nodded as she held out the hydrangea tea in the bamboo pipe. As usual, they were at the back of the washing area, chatting as they ate. They were taking an autonomous break, not slacking off.

“Something like a peculiar court lady in recent times?”

“A peculiar court lady hmm. Like what for example?”

Her mouth full of beverage, Shaoran asked.

“For example, a court lady who laughs while searching for something in the thicket.”

Shaoran stared at Maomao. She stared at her as she gulped down her tea.

“Aside from me.”

Maomao added the remark. Shaoran closed her eyes and groaned.
Why was that, she felt that she was getting awful treatment?

“That sort of weird court lady, I wonder if she *does* exist. Ah!”

“You happen to know something?”

Shaoran jumped down from the barrel and went towards the court ladies who were chatting around the well.

Maomao followed her.

“Hey hey, recently, didn’t you say that there was a weird court lady?”

Shaoran asked the trio of court ladies. They seemed to be acquaintances, they greeted Shaoran. But when Maomao neared, they made a guarded expression.

The curious court lady who talked to Maomao was only Shaoran, so that should be it.

“There is if you say there is.”

“Hey.”

She thought it was a somewhat biting way of speaking.

“Ehhh, who was it, who? Tell me—“

Shaoran, who wasn’t shy, asked as she persistently poked then. However, the three court ladies exchanged glances and hesitated on speaking.

They were probably minding Maomao’s presence. Maomao’s clothes were different to the other court ladies. Her clothes were still simple and easy to move in, but it was different to the clothes the other court ladies wore that were supplied to them by the inner palace. Court ladies who follow consort higher than those with rooms were provided clothes from their consorts.

And because of that, they had a rough idea of whether she was with a consort or not. There was an unspeakable wall.

(I made a mistake.)

I should’ve just watched from afar, Maomao regretted. As there were court ladies who held antagonism towards the court ladies of consorts, there were also those who hold their tongue from the worry of spreading rumours to inferiors.

Simple court ladies like Shaoran were unusual.

So what can she do?

Even if she were to fish around for snacks, she had given them all away to Shaoran just then. *Is there anything else I can use in exchange?* Maomao searched her pockets.

(Oh!?)

That's it, Maomao took out a certain thing.

“Depending on the details you give me, I’ll give you this.”

She took out the silky cloth that was nice to feel. There was the faint scent of incense left on it. It was meant to be used as a towel, but since the material was good, it can be used as whatever.

It was the towel that Jinshi gave her the other day. After this she was heading to the medical office, she had considered selling it to the quack doctor. She didn’t want to think about the quack doctor feeling inclined towards males, but since it was the beautiful eunuch’s item, she had thought that he would more or less shell out money for it.

“What is, this?”

“It’s like silk. It’s not suited for its use though.”

Maomao said, and one of the court ladies staggered over to take a sniff.

“That scent. Don’t tell me!?”

Maomao faced that court lady with subdued eyes, but only her lips drew an arc.

“I’ll leave it to your imagination.”

In the face of revealing Jinshi’s name, Maomao thought she would become shady on the contrary. If she let them sniff it like this, she figured that she let them imagine it however they like.

The court lady with the good sense of smell was muttering, “This is, don’t tell me, no, that gentleman’s...” Maomao didn’t know exactly who the court lady was imagining, but it should be good that it looked like she was going to snap at it. Seeing that, the other two court ladies also came closer to sniff the towel.

Maomao folded up the towel and looked at the court ladies.

“Excuse me, may I ask you some questions?”

Maomao said to the deferential court ladies.



According to what the court ladies had said, the person was found close to the forest of the south side.

Maomao headed to the place that they mentioned.

(It really isn't convenient.)

Maomao sat down under the shade of a tree. Since it was summer, there were a lot of grating insect sounds. Cicada sounds she still forgave, but she had beaten several mosquitos that had whined unpleasantly next to her ears to death.

(I should have come with mosquito repelling smoke.)

She had burned mugwort and the fresh pine leaves to use as an insect repellent. Since there was Princess Rinrii who was still young, she couldn't miss on the insect repellent counterplan at the Jade Palace.

The area close to the forest didn't seem to be cleaned much, various plants grew here and there. Aside from pampas grass, she saw red flowers growing en masse.

Maomao approached the red flowers.

(Was it in such a place?)

Those were white-powder flowers¹. The trumpet-shaped flowers opened up their buds when evening approached.

Maomao picked one up and crushed the petals. Red juice stained her fingers. When she was young, that was what she usually played with.

And then, she also remembered the prostitutes coming to gather the seeds.

You'll find white powder inside the seeds when you crush them. It doesn't mean that the prostitute used these as face powder.

Maomao still had a certain uncomfortable feeling. The incident that occurred at the Crystal Palace the other day. Where Consort Rifa's head maid, Shin, was trying to make an abortion drug.

She recalled that.

Shin, at first, wasn't wearing perfume or anything. As there were components in the perfume that held the danger of miscarriage, if she bragged that she was a capable person suitable to be a consort herself, it wouldn't be strange for her to avoid wearing that on her body.

In reality, Shin should be considering surpassing Consort Rifa. If Consort Rifa was unable to beget a child, her family would also consider a different person as consort.

That, as far as Shin was wearing the smell of the perfume, the reason she tried to make an abortion drug was—.

Consort Rifa was wearing a loose outfit. Just like Consort Gyokuyou, something that didn't constrict the abdomen.

And, was it Maomao's imagination that she had a feeling that her cheeks were rounder than before?

It doesn't mean at all that only Consort Gyokuyou received the emperor's favour. That possibility was good enough, but Maomao didn't say anything.

Even if she said something there, Maomao wasn't in the position to help Consort Rifa.

The reason she had an uncomfortable feeling was concerning the ingredients that were used in that storage shed. Perfumes and etc, it was full of items that anyone bought from the caravans if they had money.

She understood that.

Maomao cannot stand mysteries.

The reason the prostitutes gathered the seeds of the white-powder flower, was to make the drug to abort the child in their abdomen. In addition, you can also boil things like winter cherry and tree peony, rose balsam, garden peony and mercury to abort. Mercury aside, it appears to be likely that the other flowers were ingredients that

could be obtained in the inner palace.

The drink that Shin decocted didn't contain any of them.

Even though this way seems much simpler.

And so, Maomao had an anxiety inside her.

That someone must have expressly taught Shin poison.

And, that this person must still be in the inner palace.

She had fleetingly mentioned it to Jinshi as a hint, but he would investigate because it was his issue. However, it was a problem that obstinate former head maid had confessed it easily though.

As she was thinking about that, the sunlight had weakened considerably. The sun hid in the shadow of the forest, the shadows lengthened.

Suddenly, all at once, the chirps of the noisy cicadas subsided.

Ring.

She heard the faint sound of a bell.

And, she heard rustling sounds along with that sound.

Maomao faced the direction the sound came from, she turned her gaze. She saw something large crawling within the pampas grass.

There, jumping like a frog, both hands raised up, the person started to laugh loudly.

"I caught *you*—"

She heard a shrill voice. An innocent voice that retained its innocence like Shaoran, but the owner of the voice was tall. However, the face that was lit with a smile of delight, was younger than her height suggested.

It was a face she had seen before.

Her clothes were the special attire that was provided from consorts.

With a face that was delighted from the bottom of her heart, the girl put her fisted hands into the bamboo insect cage.

Ring.

Again, the sound of a bell.

She noticed that she heard it from the direction of that girl.

Maomao remembered.

The court lady who turned up at the medical office the other day. The girl who came to get medicine.

That time, she didn't really say anything, Seeing her now, *her impression is surprising different huh*, Maomao thought.

(At any rate.)

The girl darted around the thicket like a frog, catching insects while laughing.

(To think I was confused with someone like that.)

How unthinkable, Maomao thought.

Even Maomao was a little more normal, she thought.

Turns out, since Consort Rouran was also eccentric, the court lady who serves her was also eccentric.

Maomao was satisfied with verifying just that and was going to leave this place in haste.

She was going to leave, but.

Ring. She heard the bell-like sound close to her ear. *Oh no*, she tilted her head and felt her head. An insect that Maomao has never seen before had perched there. It seems that the source of the bell-like sound was this.

It was fine if it was just that but.

Suddenly the shadow of a person hung over before Maomao.

“Insect—”

Along with the shrill voice, Maomao was crushed by that shadow of that person.

T/N: The title of the chapter (虫愛づる) comes from The Insect-loving Princess (虫愛づる姫君), which is a 12th-century Late-Heian period Japanese short story from an anthology. It was about an eccentric princess who was more interested in gross insects like caterpillars (instead of butterflies and flowers like a normal young lady would prefer) than beautifying and presenting herself as a decent lady of those times. She looks and acts child-like this way. She doesn't have a modest personality, is argumentative, and often charges at people with logic. She is totally defying social convention.

(There's also a next part which is about this playboy bishie who hears about this girl and goes to see her. He sends her a Waka poem, and she replies to him in kanji (Heian women are usually taught to only write in hiragana), he finds her interesting, and romance begins to ensue... and the story ends here. No continuation...)

1. *Mirabilis jalapa*. From last chapter.

CHAPTER 17

SHISUI

The person leaning over was looking at Maomao with a blank expression. *The face she's making somehow reminds me of a squirrel*, Maomao thought.

"I'll be happy if you could move aside."

Maomao said, but the girl didn't budge. Her hands, placed right on top of Maomao's head, didn't move.

She was making a somewhat awkward expression.

Maomao could pretty much guess what happened.

"I'll be happy if you move aside quickly. I don't want to have the insect stuck on my head."

The moment the girl sprang upon her, she heard a crunch.

What she guessed, was that something got smashed.

The girl, making a bitter smile, slowly moved off Maomao.



It felt good when she poured cold well water over her head. It felt good, but it didn't get rid of the gross feeling.

The girl held out a towel to the soaked Maomao. Maomao took it with thanks and dried herself.

The insect cage that was hanging from the girl's sash had several charred-coloured bugs inside. Their wings trembled and they made a bell-like sound.

"Were you trying to catch those insects?"

"Yeah."

With some awkwardness, the girl faced Maomao with her eyes sparkling.
It seems this was because Maomao was talking about insects.

What should I do if that's the case? Maomao thought. The girl took Maomao's hand and dragged her over to the other side of the well. They were under the shade of the trees, and there was a wooden box in a place where it was easy to sit. *Sit here*, the girl tapped the wooden box.

(...)

She had a very unpleasant promotion.
And she was pretty much on the mark.



“So you see, this insect lives in the island country of the east. It makes a sound when it flutters its wings.”

The girl spoke, gazing at the insect cage.

“It is likely, that these guys were escapees from among the trade goods. I think, they only inhabit here, in this country.”

It seems so, Maomao sluggishly made an agreeable response.

“Its colours are somewhat similar to cockroaches, but it's alright since it's a different creature.”

I shouldn't have asked, Maomao thought. She scrubbed her head with the towel once again.

And just like so, the girl who spoke without a lisp, slowly talked about the insects for a quarter-dual-hours(30min). Maomao tried to cut in every now and then to break it up, and each time, her sleeves were tugged and she was stopped.
She had no choice but to listen.

She understood that the girl was focused on talking about her own interests, but she wanted to tell her that it was troublesome to listen.

(If it's medicine, that would still be fine though.)

That saying, Maomao remembered.

"Hey, you know much about medicines?"

She decided to force a topic change. She was pretty sure this girl turned up at the medical office to pick up medicine. If the quack doctor was telling the truth, she should be able to compound.

"Eh, medicine? I suppose so. I can do the simple stuff since my older sister taught me to remember it. Before, I got medicine from the old man here, but it was terrible. If that's the case, it would be better if I made it myself."

What an awful way of putting the quack doctor. Well, it can't be helped. It was true.

"Your older sister taught you?"

I'm kinda interested in that, Maomao thought.

It wasn't absent, but female pharmacists were few. She was super interested.

"Yeah, when I was young. I only know the simple medicines though."

"Is she in the inner palace?"

"Not the inner palace, she's being a court lady in the imperial court."

That's unfortunate, Maomao thought.

With the conversation paused, Maomao could finally stand up.

"I have work to do."

"Ehh, let's talk a bit more."

"..., I'll consider if it's something other than insects."

No, caterpillar grass might work though.

When she tried to return the wet towel as it is, the girl smiled in delight.

“I’m, called Shisui¹.”

“Maomao.”

Maomao, after just saying that, decided to return to the Jade Palace.

Shisui waved her hands widely, “See *you*—”.

She thought she wasn’t a bad child, she thought but.

Maomao touched her head.

There was still the feeling of that crunch.



When she returned to the Jade Palace, the regular eunuch was in the middle of visiting. The eunuchs who followed Jinshi were waiting outside the palace. As it was Jinshi and Gaoshun who entered the palace, the eunuchs aside from them had to wait outside.

(It’s tough in the middle of the heat.)

The eunuchs fanned themselves as it was hot. She saw the water laid out on the outside table; someone must have given it out. This season, if you neglect hydration, you could faint. *Good call*, Maomao thought.

“Maomao.”

As soon as she returned, Guien called out to Maomao.

“Gyokuyou-sama is calling.”

Maomao hurried over to the guest room where Consort Gyokuyou was.

She could imagine the gist of what was up at this sort of time.



As she thought, sitting comfortably on the couch, was the waiting eunuch.

Maomao briefly greeted him with a nod and went to stand in front of Consort Gyokuyou.

“Gyokuyou-sama, what do you require of me?”

“It’s not me who has business.”

Consort Gyokuyou was drinking warm fruit juice. In truth, she preferred cider with expensive ice, but she avoided that with her pregnancy.
To escape the heat, Honnyan was waving a fan beside her.

“It’s me who has business.”

Jinshi said, his face beautiful as usual.
Just like Honnyan, Gaoshun was fanning Jinshi.

Originally, this should be done by someone with a more lower position, but seeing that there weren’t anyone, it had to be the usual secret talk.

“What kind of business?”

“I was thinking of wanting to have her returned for a couple of days.”

‘Return’ referred to the form where Maomao was lent to Consort Gyokuyou from Jinshi. Until Consort Gyokuyou gave birth with no issues, they had decided that Maomao will stay with her.

“Oh my. What about food tasting during that period?”

Consort Gyokuyou pressed.

“I did not overlook that point. In exchange, I shall lend you my maid. Though she isn’t as knowledgeable as this girl, she is a person that is familiar with the types of poison.”

“Can I trust you?”

“Those are strict words.”

Consort Gyokuyou made a malicious smile.

Speaking of Jinshi’s maid, Maomao could only think of one person. It was the middle-aged court lady, Suiren.

Certainly if it that person, she would come around as a substitute for Maomao at least.

However, if that’s the case, who will look after Jinshi? Maomao thought. The good-natured old housekeeper always pampered the grown-adult young master.

“For a couple of days you say, where will you be going out to?”

“Yes, I was invited to go falconry.”

“That’s surprising.”

(Falconry huh.)

That again, was a high society pastime.

“They said it will be in Shishou-sama’s territory.”

Jinshi was grinning, but his expression was well-guarded.

(Shishou-sama huh.)

If she remembered correctly, that was the high official said to be Consort Rouran’s father.

Was it her imagination that she thought it was somewhat suspicious?

Don’t drag me into troublesome things, Maomao thought. *No, if it’s falconry, are we able to eat fresh rabbits too, I wonder,* she considered.

(If you must, more than rabbit meat, cakes with rabbit would be good huh.)

The rabbits on the moon pound medicine with a mallet. There was that sort of fairy tale.

“How tough. Even to socialise.”

“Even this one has various things to say about it.”

“And so, you said you want to borrow Maomao, right.”

“Yes, I mentioned I want you to return this girl.”

Consort Gyokuyou’s eyes lit up with a sparkle.

“Would it be fine if it wasn’t Maomao? I have others besides her.”

“No, I would be fine if you just return this girl.”

Was it her imagination that there were sparks, somehow, in the space between Jinshi and Consort Gyokuyou? Maomao, for now, took over fanning for Honnyan whose hands were tired.

“Ummm, which child should I lend you?”

“I said, I just want that girl returned.”

Consort Gyokuyou giggled, her eyes squinted.

“Fufufu, you keep on calling her just ‘that girl’ from way back.”

“...And what about it?”

Jinshi’s face was slightly twisted.

“Hey, Gaoshun. What do you call Maomao?”

Consort Gyokuyou asked the taciturn attendant playfully.

“I call her Shaomao.”

Comparatively, for his reticence, it was a familiar way of calling her.

Consort Gyokuyou faced Jinshi with eyes like she was tracking down game.

“Hey, then, what do you normally call Maomao?”

“...”

Jinshi made an awkward expression and glanced at Maomao.

(That saying, he never called me by my name huh.)

Maomao realised, once again.

(I don't really care though.)

Despite this, it was mysterious why Jinshi looked uncomfortable.

At such a Maomao, Honnyan poked her elbow and make a look like she wanted to say something, but she didn't understand that either.

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1. 子翠, Zi Cui in Chinese.

CHAPTER 18

BASEN

The north of the capital extends out to the grain-producing region. There is a large river that flows from west to east, with towns and villages scattered here and there.

Where the south grew rice, the north grew sorghum and wheat. There were forests up further north, and beyond that was the mountain range.

Northward beyond the forest, was the Shi Northern Province¹. It wasn't under the direct jurisdiction of the emperor.

The area where the capital was centred was the Ka Province². There were three other large provinces, and several tens of small provinces as if to fill the gaps.

Shi Northern. You can somehow expect what it entails by seeing the name. The high official called Shishou originated from the Shi Northern Province.

(What was it again, the founding story?)

The country Maomao resided in was called Rii³. A simple country name of only a single character. That alone illustrated the founding story of this country.

Three Blades⁴ below the Grass⁵. The grass had the meaning of "Ka"⁶. This represented the founding emperor of this country. According to the story, it was said to be a woman. The blade represented the warriors – it was said that there were three warriors that accompanied the founder.

Maomao had a feeling it was a lot more complicated when it is spoken in detail, but as she was yawning as she listened, she didn't really remember.

What she barely remembered was that the blades were different sized. The blade on top was bigger compared to the two beneath it.

For that reason, she also understood the reason why the current emperor cannot raise his head.

North, in other words, the *Blade on Top*, as the high officials like to call it, was the place

said to do leisurely things like falconry.

The emperor didn't come as expected, but it was said all the renowned people were gathered.

All this, was explained to her by the military officer before her eyes.

Currently, Maomao was travelling in a bumpy horse carriage.

The speed of the horse carriage was about two-and-a-half li⁷ (10km) in a half-dual-hour (1 hour). Hasn't it already run for three-dual-hours (6 hours)?

(My butt hurts.)

Even if she revealed her honest feelings, and wanted to try improving the current situation, for the time being, she laid out a sitting cushion underneath. Everyone was in the same position; nothing could be done of it even if she complained. Maomao kept silent and looked outside.

Although it was Shishou's invitation, it truly was difficult to go from the capital to the Shi Northern Province. It wasn't a distance where you can return home in one or two days. Even Shishou was taking up residence in the capital. The Shi Northern Province was governed by Shishou's clan.

Let's see now, the military officer who explained to Maomao what she wasn't interested in was Basen. With a sour look, he briefly summed it up to Maomao, then went silent with his arms crossed. Just like that, the officials who were riding the horse carriage with them looked worn out, as they were in the same carriage as them.

It seems they couldn't sleep before a superior officer who appears to have a high rank despite being still young. Jinshi and Gaoshun were riding in a different horse carriage.

There was a bit of drool around Maomao's mouth, but it was amusing.

Seeing Maomao like that, Basen clicked his tongue.

"Why is Father⁸, to this girl..."

(Father, is it?)

It's no wonder it was a face I recognise from somewhere, she thought.

This man, was Gaoshun's son.

(*Gaoshun* and *Basen* huh.)

There was something she was stuck on, but let's not say it out loud.

The eunuch Gaoshun having a son hm, she thought at first, but when she considered it, it doesn't mean that eunuchs were eunuchs since they were born. Basing it on his age, it wouldn't be unusual for him to have even one or two children.

After hearing about this, Maomao thought about the head maid in her thirties who was in the Jade Palace.

Maomao knew that since the head maid was in a workplace where she has too little meetings, recently, she has been muttering that even eunuchs were fine recently, and looked at Gaoshun a lot.

During that, she saw from the window that they were approaching a large estate.

When Basen relaxed his crossed arms as they were finally there, the other officials were relieved.

Maomao gazed at the estate awestruck as she rubbed her backside.



The estate was very much imposing.

As the town itself wasn't *that* large, let's take this place as a different world. It should be a construction of sufficient scale for people with critical eyes from the capital to stay in.

The roof of the three-storey building had conspicuous red pillars that imitated the shape of beasts. There was a moat around the estate, where carp the colour of brocade⁹ swam in.

Here and there, dragons and tigers covered up the inside of the stucco wall. It must have been carefully constructed by craftsmen with trowels. It was a decor that was hardly seen in the capital.

Maomao was taking a long hard look when she was poked from her side. When she looked up, Basen was glaring at her, so she meekly trailed after him.



When she entered the room she was guided into, Jinshi was listlessly stretched out on the couch. There was sweltering-hued cloth on the table. She realised that was a hood.

(I see.)

It was a sin to be too beautiful. To think that he needed to specifically bring even a mask to hide from everyone when he goes to faraway places. Certainly, this man could even stop the hearts of innocent town girls with just a smile. It was a good graciously troublesome face.

As this room was for guests, she understood that basing from the arrangement of the estate, the highest floor was for guests only. Even the fixtures and furniture were splendid, but since she was accustomed to these from the Jade Palace and Jinshi's building, she estimated it was something like that. Even so, it was a satisfactory room for the guest of honour.

At any rate, this room is hot, Maomao thought.

The windows were closed. Instead, there were lanterns.

She wanted to loosen her collar, but since she couldn't possibly do that, she endured.

Jinshi was already baring his chest. She subconsciously faced him with eyes like she was looking at a crushed frog for the first time a while.

It must be because there was only Maomao, Gaoshun, and Basen in the room. This look of relaxation is-

It looked like there were shadows on Jinshi's face. Could it be a trick of the wavering light from the lanterns?

"What do I call him here?"

Basen asked Gaoshun.

"It is as usual within the room. Outside, call me Kousen¹⁰."

"Certainly, *Kousen-sama*."

It was Jinshi who answered on behalf of Gaoshun.

Oh, Maomao tilted her head, looking at Gaoshun.

Gaoshun, while stroking his chin, looked at Jinshi, and Jinshi looked at Maomao with squinted eyes.

At that scene, Basen was even more doubtful.

He stalked over to Gaoshun,

“Father, what is this supposed to mean?”

He asked.

Gaoshun, his expression slightly clouded, signalled with his eyes to Jinshi. And then, he dragged Basen’s arms to the corner of the room for some reason and spoke to him furtively.

From whatever Gaoshun had said, Basen looked at Maomao in surprise. And then, as if Gaoshun was against that, he shut up and dropped a fist on his son.

What are they doing? Maomao thought, but since it wasn’t like she was interested in it, she decided to put away the baggage for the time being.

If she didn’t do her work properly, Suiren will get angry afterward.



Falconry was tomorrow, so they were staying over in the estate today.

There was a night banquet being held in the garden, but Jinshi and the others weren’t in the state to go outside. With the window shut, they just wasted time reading books and playing go.

The room was hot, but it became somewhat better when they received ice. Having it brought over by a fast horse from an ice room, in summer, was the highest grade of luxury.

Since Maomao was looking at the ice extremely enviously, Gaoshun snuck some ice shards over to her. He really is a thoughtful eunuch.

If it’s like that, we might as well just open the windows, Maomao thought, and blurted out the question.

“Why aren’t we opening the windows?”

She had asked Gaoshun, but it was Jinshi who spoke.

“For starters, go food taste the dinner.”

You’ll know when you do it, Jinshi said with an amazed expression.



As she was told, when the dinner was carried over, Maomao served it on a small dish and began the usual food tasting.

“...”

“You should know now.”

Jinshi looked at the extravagant meal with amazement. The meals that were carried on the cart seemed like the highest cuisine that made the best use of the ingredients though.

“To think it’s *suppon* meat. This again.”

Suppon. Turtle meat. A creature that won’t let go when it bites at you once. Its fresh blood is used as a vitality drug. Of course, its meat seems to also have that effect.

She tasted the aperitif too. Fruit juice was added to make it seem like it was refreshing – there was something considerably intense was added.

From the aperitif to the appetiser, side dishes, main dishes, even the fruit, it was heaped with ingredients that made you vigorous.

Gaoshun silently prepared the portable food he took out from the baggage. It seems he was going to have a modest dinner with the long-awaited cuisines before his eyes.

“Are you not going to eat? There’s no poison.”

“Even if there’s no poison, it’s not something you can eat. Or, should I say, you can’t eat

it with composure.”

I can't believe it, she looked at Jinshi and Gaoshun with those eyes. Basen was boiling water in the corner of the room. Wasn't it really hot?

“It's really delicious. It'll arouse suspicions if we leave it, so may I eat it?”

“Do whatever you want!”

Jinshi looked at the satisfied Maomao's face, and he squinted, lips slightly puckered.

Maomao ate the *suppon* soup like it was delicious.

Jinshi stared at her doing that.

“Is it tasty? That.”

“Indeed, I don't have good memories of *suppon*, but this is good.”

“What is it? This memory.”

Jinshi, with a bit of great interest, picked up the bowl of soup.

“It's not a big deal though.”

Maomao was her foster father's assistant ever since she was young. She had also gone to buy medicinal ingredients from the market, but in the middle of that, she came across good-for-nothing adults.

They were exhibitionists, who untie their sashes and clothes, fully exposing themselves. There were many in winter.

The surprised Maomao was about to run away, but she unintentionally threw the package in her hands.

“So that package was a *suppon* that was alive, and that—”

“Ahh, enough. Enough. You don't have to say it.”

Jinshi put down the bowl and made a distant stare.

Gaoshun and his son did the same.

(It was popular with the prostitutes though.)

As I thought, the story doesn't suit people with good upbringing, Maomao put down the emptied dish.

But, it really is a waste, Maomao thought.

"The other things aside from *suppon* are also delicious though. Is it really fine to not eat it?"

It was iffy that she was recommending a half-eaten meal, but it wasn't an amount that Maomao can finish alone. And besides, reconstituted dried meat and rice won't fill up the bellies of three men.

"...Is it okay to eat?"

Jinshi asked Maomao to make sure.

"Go ahead."

It's waste to have to leave it, Maomao thought.

"Is it really okay?"

Jinshi looked at Maomao intently.

I don't understand why he's asking this much, Maomao tilted her head, and Gaoshun entered from her side. He gave a tiny shake of his head for some reason, and Jinshi reluctantly nodded.

"I'm good. Basen, you can eat it."

"If Kousen-sama says so."

Basen sat on the seat humbly. Maomao passed over a cup of the aperitif.

He slowly drank that down.

“It’s tasty.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Just that.”

“Just that?”

Basen stopped moving, and blood trickled down his nose.

His face was bright red, and he looked like he was holding back on something. When Jinshi peered at his face, he trembled in surprise.

“Why, is this girl fine?”

“Even if you ask why.”

Her constitution is like that, there’s no other way to say it.

Basen’s eyes were glassy. His cheeks were flushed, he was looking around like he was seeking for something.

“...Basen, hurry up and sleep.”

“I understand, father.”

Basen tried to stumble over to the room next door and collapsed just like that.

“What is wrong?”

When Maomao asked,

“Let him sleep here. I’ll sleep in the room next door.”

Jinshi said.

“Jinshi-sama, I’ll properly carry him to his room.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“But...”

If Jinshi says it that way, Gaoshun put his doubled-over son to sleep on a bed with a canopy. Maomao also more or less helped. Since he looked like he was sweltering, when they loosened his collar, his complexion became slightly better. Some nose blood got onto the sheets, she was slightly sorry.

Jinshi slept in the room next door. Maomao was permitted to use the room next to his.

It’s such a luxury to have a room to myself, Maomao thought. She took a bath. It was a small bit of happiness.

1. 子北州
2. 華州
3. 荔
4. 刀
5. 草. Becomes 『艹』 in radical form.
6. 華
7. 里, a unit of distance that is approximately 3.927 kilometers or 2.44 miles.
8. 父上, *chichi-ue*. Very formal
9. Red, yellow and white
10. 香泉, Xiang Quan in Chinese.

CHAPTER 19

FEVER (1)

The next day, Jinshi and the others rode horses to the falconry grounds. Jinshi begrudgingly wore a mask, and assumed the name “Kousen.”

It wasn't that she didn't understand the point of the mask. Having a man with a beauty like Jinshi's loitering around, that in itself is an annoyance. Here wasn't the inner palace – it was full of people who didn't know he is a eunuch.

Last night, there was a commotion in Jinshi's guest room. Though she said it was Jinshi's room, it was Basen who was sleeping there. She heard Basen screaming.

When she considered what it was, he was surrounded by women who had snuck in from somewhere and saw a very envious, no, he saw hell. It is possible that to say that, in a way, after drinking that aperitif, he tried his best maintaining his self-control.

There was a motive for serving up such a dinner. There were many maidens in this estate who want to become the lovers of high officials.

What could possibly happen if Jinshi walked about barefaced? It seems shutting up the windows excessively was also to not let people see his face.

(If so, I can understand why he has the mask.)

But, what about the alias?

Even if she thought about these sort of things, Maomao didn't have anything to say about interfering either. Court ladies who can read the atmosphere should just keep silent collectively.

And so, Maomao was going after the group who were going to falconry via horse carriage. The horse carriage transported the servants of the estate and was packed with lots of food preparation tools like pots and kindling.

They must be intending to prepare the caught game on the grounds.

Giving a sidelong glance at the sorghum fields, in around a-quarter-dual-hour of the carriage shaking, she could see the forests and the grassy plains.

The servants were experienced. They promptly prepared an open fire in front of the forest. As it appears that there is a water source in the forest, a number of the servants carried pots and went to collect water.

Maomao thought about helping out on something, but the companions of the officials around her were doing nothing. They were chatting in the tent that had been set up by the servants who arrived earlier.

(It's more acceptable to do nothing.)

It is often the case that there is pretext attached to helping an inferior. Even the servants must prefer it that way.

Maomao looked at the sky. She saw a single black speck in the blue sky. It was gliding. While she looked at it repeat that several times, Maomao's eyes shifted to the forest.

(A forest huh)

It's a pretty good forest, Maomao thought.

There were various types of trees growing. She had a good feeling that medicinal herbs and mushrooms would happen to grow in this kind of place.

(I suppose I'm not allowed to go in.)

She was sorely tempted. Maomao glanced at her surroundings.

No one around here should notice, but oh well.

And just like that, the sun had crossed the meridian when she realised it.



There was the savoury aroma of cooking meat.

She was being treated to a cup of wine inside the tent. The cooked meat was distributed by the women. There were around ten officials seated at the table, where there were other side dishes prepared.

Although it was a tent, there was a path for the wind flow, and buckets filled with water were left at their feet. There were also servants bearing large fans. She could see the effort to make the sweltering summer hunt comfortable.

The servants diligently carried over the food.

Since just the game procured from falconry wasn't sufficient, they also cooked other meats. First off, meat was different to fish, it wasn't something you can say is delicious when it was freshly caught.

Maomao was waiting behind Gaoshun. She gazed at the party scene in a daze. Gaoshun was also provided with a seat.

(That said,)

Aside from the time he was in the room, Gaoshun is hardly with Jinshi huh, she thought. Instead, it was Basen who did various things, and Maomao followed Gaoshun as a matter of course.

On the line-up of seats, sitting on the seat of honour, was a strange man. His face was hidden behind a mask. He didn't touch the food at all. The wine too. Basen was anxiously watching from the back.

(It's rough that he has to wear it here as well huh.)

Maomao watched like it was someone else's problem. The women who were distributing the wine looked at Jinshi, the Prince of the Mask, from time to time. He is the highest guest of honour among them, no matter how suspicious a mask he tried to wear. It was much more stable to become the mistress of a high official than to marry up. It seems to be a gathering of this kind of determined women.

It wasn't just women who were involved. The plump man sitting beside Jinshi was speaking to him like he was whispering. It was an intimate way to speak to someone, but was it her imagination that she could hear a little bit of impoliteness? Jinshi could only tremble slightly at that.

(Is that the man called Shishou?)

She may have heard the name before, but she didn't know his face. It shouldn't be wrong to think that from the position of his seat.

(I wonder what they're talking about.)

Shishou stopped talking and removed his face from Jinshi.
Jinshi's hands continued to tremble.

Basen's complexion got worse.

(Did he say something?)

No, Maomao whispered to Gaoshun.

He looks strange.

However, Gaoshun shook his head lightly, and just told her to standby.



Under the guise of a toilet trip, Jinshi stood up from his seat.

Gaoshun pulled Maomao's sleeves.

"It's about time you switch over."

Maomao nodded and called for another attendant who was outside the tent. She then went after Jinshi who was walking with an unsteady gait.

And, before that.

"May I have this?"

Maomao took a sake bottle that contained water, asking the servant who had prepared the meals.

"Ahh, sure."

The busy-seeming servant left without looking around much. Maomao added some seasoning to the bottle with a spoon.

She took that and went inside the forest.



Even though she entered a little while later, she found a figure in the forest.

The staggering person was leaning against a tree.

“Ji...”

Jinshi-sama, Maomao was going to say, but she held her mouth. Why was he using an alias here? *What name should I call him*, she thought as she rushed over.

“...it’s you?”

She heard a hoarse voice from behind the mask.

“Please take this off.”

Maomao was going to strip off the mask, but Jinshi frantically held it down.

“You can’t.”

“It’s not you can’t. If it’s here, there’s no one.”

“No, someone might come.”

(Ahh, such a pain!)

Maomao lifted the staggering man’s arm over her shoulders and pulled.

“If you’re that worried about people looking, we’ll just have to go to a place where they can’t see you.”

They headed deeper into the forest. The forest became slightly elevated like a hill. She saw a cliff – there was a beautiful waterfall. *I can collect water from here*, Maomao judged, and dipped the towel in the river.

(Will it be okay if it’s there?)

Close to the cliff, there was a cave that seemed to be right in a blind spot. They went in that and Maomao used the dangling ivy as a curtain.

There was an old tree growing on the side, with parasol-like things on the trunk.

(Bracket fungus?)

Let's gather some back afterwards, Maomao thought. It was a mushroom that was firm like tree bark; it is used as ingredients for medicine.

There were lots of old pot shards fallen in the cave. It appears that it was used as a storehouse of the water drawing place, but it didn't seem to have been used in a long time.

"It should be fine if it's here."

Maomao piled up the tattered woven mats that were there and spread out a different dry towel on top. She slowly laid down Jinshi on that.

He took off the mask, revealing a beautiful face that was bright red.

"Please drink this."

Maomao carried the bottle she brought over to Jinshi's lips. She got him to sip it slowly, and then passed it over to Jinshi's hands afterwards.

"After this, excuse me."

"...!?"

Maomao loosened Jinshi's sash, stripping off his outer garment. Jinshi was bewildered, but he didn't have the energy to resist. She wiped down his naked torso with the towel she had soaked some time ago. She inserted the towel under his armpit to dampen all his skin.

"Not just court ladies, you even strip off men's clothes?"

"It's not like I stripped you because I wanted to."

At what Jinshi had said while in a daze, Maomao returned a pout.

Even if she stripped off the clothes of the rascal, it wasn't interesting.

Jinshi's body had a trace of fever. Having been wiped down, he should be more or less better.

He still looked bad, but she felt that his complexion had become marginally better after drinking water. Maomao propped Jinshi's head onto her lap so it would be easy for him to drink from the bottle.

"Tastes kinda weird, this."

Jinshi said as he sipped from the bottle.

"It's that kind of thing. Since it's a mixture of sauce paste and sugar. I couldn't find salt, so it's a substitute. A mixture of these things seem to be good for increasing hydration."

Maomao said as she fanned some wind over to Jinshi's face with the mask.

"On such a nice day like this, you'll be brought down by the sun by wearing such a thing."

"...Not like there was anything I could do about it."

"It is tough, to have a face that is so wastefully lovely."

Maomao said in amazement.

In response to that, Jinshi stared at Maomao.

(Not good. Did I anger him?)

She had unintentionally said it in a sarcastic tone. Maomao awkwardly glanced at Jinshi. He didn't seem angry.

Relieved, Maomao took the towel she wedged under Jinshi's armpits. She was going to slowly put down Jinshi's head and stand up.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to soak the towel again."

“You don’t have to.”

Even if you say that, Maomao thought. Jinshi’s body temperature was still high; she wanted to cool him down a little more.

But, Jinshi didn’t let go of her.

“There’s something I want to talk about.”

Jinshi said, his voice cracked yet earnest. The eyes staring at Maomao were like polished obsidian.

Maomao spontaneously shifted her gaze like she was reacting against it. Her eyes suddenly went to the old tree outside the cave.

“For that intention, I brought you along this time.”

An earnest, but slightly bewildered voice.

Amidst that, Maomao felt her own pulse starting to race. Her heart thumped noisily, sending blood, heating up her entire body.

“Jinshi-sama, please release me.”

Maomao squinted and said to Jinshi. She wasn’t looking at his eyes, she was just looking outside.

“I won’t.”

“Please release me!”

Maomao shook off Jinshi, she tried to leave the cave. She stretched out her right hand and tried to grasp the thing that was beyond her.

However, her left hand was grasped, and she was forcefully tugged back, breaking her stance. As she spun around, like she was going to slam onto the floor, her face was pressed into a sweaty chest.

What could he be doing, Maomao thought.

She looked beyond her outstretched hand. In about three shaku¹, she could see an old plum tree. At its roots, there was something protruding growing there.

The parasol shape of it growing only on the tree trunk, looked like the bracket fungus but was a little different. The surface was glossy like it was painted with candy. There wasn't the roughness like bracket fungus.

The drumming of her heart got rapidly louder.

The mushroom recorded in books as a miracle drug from time immemorial. Right over there, was the mushroom that was named Lingzhi, or the Ten Thousand Year Mushroom.

And yet, her outstretched hand couldn't reach for it.

Instead, she was tightly embraced by Jinshi, and then—.

And then, her remaining hand grasped onto something that was somewhat squishy².

1. 尺, Japanese Foot. Length of a forearm. About 30cm.

2. Ok. So the actual description of the feeling is ぐにゅん (gu nyun). A better way of describing it is, uh... completely limp. Yeah.

CHAPTER 20

FEVER (2)

Jinshi → Maomao → mushroom

At the mystery sensation, Maomao was bewildered. She could hear the sounds of thumping. She was pressed up against a bare upper body, the heart was beating in proximity.

(What could it be, this?)

However, it was more important for her to get up. When she tried to get up to stand again, she put her weight onto something inscrutable. She was in a hurry to obtain the Ten Thousand Year Mushroom that was right before her eyes.

“Nghh!”

She heard a groan from below her.

(Not good.)

Jinshi was below her. He was grasping into Maomao’s left hand, and his other hand was around her back. It seems he sheltered Maomao when she was about to fall. Maomao looked at the spirit herb that was growing on the old tree in regret, then dropped her gaze to Jinshi.

“...Jinshi-sama?”

Jinshi turned his face away from Maomao. For some reason, his face was covered in cold sweat. His brows were knitted, he looked pained at something.

“Come on, your fever is back again.”

Maomao held out a towel to wipe his face. Jinshi released his hold around her back and held up his hand at Maomao.

“No, before all that, can you move aside?”

Still turned away, Jinshi glanced at Maomao’s face.

“...you’re touching, the, the position of your hand-”

Jinshi pointed at Maomao’s left hand. Jinshi’s hakama was under that hand. She felt she was pressing down on something soft¹.

(Umm, soft?)

No, it gradually wasn’t getting soft—.

Maomao flew off him. Eyes wide, she looked at the sprawled eunuch.

No, could he even be called a eunuch?

The part that eunuchs must not have, was right there.

Jinshi sighed deeply as he brushed up his bangs. And then, he looked at Maomao.

“In a way, you can say you eliminated the labour?”

The beautiful celestial maiden’s face was tinged with sorrow. But, this guy wasn’t a celestial maiden. While he possessed the face that could topple the country with just a smile, this guy wasn’t a woman.

And, he wasn’t a eunuch who threw away the symbol of a man.

A bare upper body with his outer garment off. There wasn’t any sign of flabbiness. It was a slightly tensed, trained body. Certainly, his looks were like a celestial maiden, but his body was no different to a well-trained warrior.

He might not actually be a eunuch, it was mystifying that never came to her mind. No, it might actually be that she had subconsciously tried not to notice it.

“I did mention that there was something I wanted to tell you.”

Maomao spontaneously had wanted to stuff her ears. She mustn't hear any more than this; Maomao had perceived that in an instant. But, that was exposed with her ears stuffed.

There was a man in the inner palace that wasn't a eunuch. What would happen if that was made public? Supposing, that man laid his hands on a consort, what would happen if there were offspring that were not the emperor's mixed in there?

Maomao's eyes narrowed.

(Stop it. Don't involve me in something troublesome.)

She had been utterly used by Jinshi up till now. No doubt they had all been more or less troublesome matters, but if it was that much, she didn't not think.

However, this was different.

If she ended up knowing about this, she needed to carry it with her to the grave.

(I don't want to accompany you to the grave!)

For that reason, Maomao-

"I'm actually—"

"Jinshi-sama!"

Maomao cut over Jinshi's voice.

"Just then, it seems there was a *frog* under your clothes."

"...frog."

Jinshi's face twisted in doubt. *That is still fine, let's overcome this no matter what,* Maomao thought.

"Indeed. A frog. My apologies. It is damp and humid here."

That soft feeling was a frog. Maomao persuaded herself it was a frog. There was a swamp nearby. It wouldn't be strange to even have one or two frogs that come out in summer.

“No, it wasn’t-“

“My apologies. I was sloppy. For Jinshi-sama to quickly cool down your fever, it would be better if we returned to the party.”

Maomao was going to leave the cave very naturally, but she was stopped, of course.

Jinshi, with a conceited expression, barred the entrance. Even if Maomao tried to avoid him and leave, she couldn’t leave.

“Jinshi-sama, can you step aside?”

“Who is a frog?”

Maomao momentarily felt like flinching at Jinshi whose face drew oppressing close. However, she couldn’t lose here.

Maomao also looked at Jinshi undauntedly. She closed in until there was a two *sun*² distance between their noses.

“If that wasn’t a frog, what could it be?”

That was a frog, that was a frog, Maomao reminded herself. The soft feeling on her left hand was a frog.

“Wasn’t it big for a frog?”

Jinshi inched towards Maomao’s face by another *sun*.

“No, during this season, there are a lot of *moderately* large frogs.”

“Mo-moderately...”

Jinshi winced. He looked like he received an impact, but Maomao readily slipped closer.

She stopped when their noses were about to touch, and delivered the finishing blow.

“That’s right, it was moderately sized. If it wasn’t a moderately sized frog, what moderately sized thing could it be?”

It truly wasn't moderately sized though, but moderately sized was good here. Moderately sized was adequate.

They glared at each other for several seconds, no several tens of seconds. And it was Jinshi who lost.

Jinshi froze, his lips in a zigzag shape. Maomao slipped through Jinshi's side in that interval.

(I, I won.)

Maomao made a fist with her right hand and put pressure into it.

It wasn't good to know too much about anything. Within her means, Maomao, who was suited as a maidservant, was better off living obliviously. If anything happens, if her superior does something, Maomao can just say "I know nothing."

Before she went to the stream to wet the towel, she sat down in front of the old plum tree. The precious, glossy mushroom that had a parasol was growing at its roots.

Maomao looked at it absorbedly.

In doing so, a shadow hung over her from behind.

"Just one question. You're fine with touching frogs yeah?"

Jinshi said in a tired voice. It felt like he could just barely move.

"Yes, commoners eat it."

It has a plain taste that was like chicken. Maomao also handled it often.

"I guess so. Then you're fine with touching it yeah?"

A faint smile appeared on Jinshi's face.

Maomao found herself getting chills. She leaned against the old plum tree.

Jinshi pointed at Maomao.

“In that case, why were you wiping your right hand some time ago?”

Jinshi said, looking like he was going to crumble over.

“Ah...”

Maomao stealthily dropped her left hand that had been wiping her hakama to forget the soft feeling. It seems she had been subconsciously wiping her hand all this time. Seeing that action, Jinshi displayed a look of terrible misery.

“Hey, why did you do that?”

The fully wounded Jinshi mustered his final strength.

Maomao lost at that blow.



The party ended not long after the return of the guest of honour.

Gaoshun was concerned about that tired appearance, but he shook his head. That wasn't his position now.

‘Gaoshun’ who was the attendant of the eunuch ‘Jinshi’ had no reason to be close to the guest of honour. In the end, he had no more than come here on behalf of his master ‘Jinshi’.

It was better if he didn't project too much.

And, Gaoshun right now had a job.

It was planned that tonight's party will be on a boat on the lake. With wine that will never run out and a gathering of beautiful women, it had to be based on an ocean of wine and mountains of meat.

Oh dear, Gaoshun thought.

Even if he went awry, Gaoshun was a *eunuch*. He wasn't interested in getting infatuated

with women, and it would become scary if he did so. When he thought about the woman who gave birth to his son Basen, his wife, in other words, he couldn't think of even lifting one finger.

"For a eunuch, this is a boring plan."

It was an official who approached Gaoshun who was only drinking wine. This boat had girls who were younger than his own child waiting on them.

"No, there's good moon viewing wine."

Gaoshun said only that, and looked up at the moon. The half-moon was beautiful. He could enjoy it as it is without the bragging of noisy men and the coquettish voices of women.

"At any rate, he won't be participating tonight either, right?"

"That's the case."

He knew who he was referring to.

Without the participation of the guest of honour, the night party could go on.

Gaoshun dripped wine onto the surface of the water and watched the ripples. *It would be good if it ended earlier*, he thought.

"The emperor is also worried for *that*, right."

The official pinched his beard and sighed.

"If *that* became the crown prince."

There was no sign of respect within the words "That".

It was true, he hardly ever leaves his room, and if he ever goes to a public place he wears a mask. *This kind of Imperial Brother shouldn't be able to rule*, everyone thought.

The guest of honour of the falconry this time, was the Imperial Brother.

The high officials gathered today had to be here half in jest. All to see the crown prince who rarely goes out in public.

Just what kind of person is he, there was no mistaking that they considered that it was important to ascertain that.

And so, this official must have decided that the crown prince was incompetent.

“From the passing of the Imperial Prince last year, I wonder if there is a consort who is expecting?”

So the main topic is this, Gaoshun thought.

Who is expecting, which consort is that, is the child a boy or a girl – depending on those, that would greatly change the image of influence in the Imperial Court.

Gaoshun slowly shook his head.

“Unfortunately. As there are many consorts, I think eventually someone would be expecting.”

“Is that so, if it’s that way.”

The official glanced at the gazebo. A plump official was standing there. He was watching to see if the guests were enjoying themselves. It was the person who held the party, Shishou.

Gaoshun sent off the official who saw through his brown-noser companion of a brief period, and poured the wine from the sake bottle with a sigh.

“I wonder if I explained it properly?”

He murmured and shook his head in negation.

When he saw the worn-out look when he returned then, he was convinced that it was impossible. At the very least, that he didn’t pass it until the main point.

“What is he doing?”

Gaoshun looked at the estate that was illuminated by the moon. On the highest storey, there was only a single room that had lights.

T/N: So we now know Jinshi is *not* a eunuch (unless that truly was a frog lel). Though Gaoshun is.

1. Ahem. So it's ぐにょん (gu nyon) now. Think still limp, but not *as* limp as last chapter. Capiisce? Cool. Moving on now.
2. 寸, unit of measurement. 3.03cm, about an inch.

INTERLUDE

THE DECISION OF A CERTAIN MILITARY OFFICER

The shuffling sound of footsteps.

Basen, hearing that sound from the inside of the room, got off his seat and went to intercept the visitor before they showed up.

The one who traversed the stone hallways was a clerk with an armful of documents. “Good work,” Basen dipped his head, accepting the papers. The clerk politely bowed his head, though he glanced into the room he was supposed to bring the papers into. The owner of the place that was established close to the deepest part of the imperial court was famous for seldom showing his face. And even if he were to go outside, you are unable to bear witness to his visage.

He always dons a mask whenever he goes out. You cannot see his bare face. A noble personage who broods about his ugly appearance due to the burns that damaged his skin when he was young. In the past, he only hid his face with his long bangs, but within these couple of years, he doesn’t show his face at all.

It might be more difficult for him that strange rumours are circulating in the imperial court regarding this gentleman.

That he was the pitiful youngest child doted by the empress dowager. Or that the emperor shuns him.

He was the current crown prince.

It was said that his ugly appearance was due to the women who had withered in the flower garden of the previous emperor. The previous emperor had reigned for a long time. Throughout that, it was also said that the number of fallen flowers totalled to the thousands in the inner palace.

Was his ugly appearance a curse?

It was a laughable story for Basen.

The documents in hand, Basen entered the office. Amidst the airy, soft incense, there was a person sitting in the office.

The person had their long hair was tied up into a bun at the back. They glided a brush across the paper.

Basen mistook that person for his master for an instant, but when he looked properly, it was clearly a different person.

It wasn't their looks. It was their air that was very similar.

The person's looks were middle-aged, features gallant and refined. Sleek brushstrokes were polished, the brush was held very much like his master.

However, the person right there could only be a different person.

Even their gender was different.

"Do I finally have work?"

He heard a dignified voice. It was high for a man, low for a woman. Her height was also the same. She was tall for a woman, she wasn't even that tall for a man.

That person, who cannot be said to be a man or a woman either, was a high-rank consort in the inner palace up until last year. Ah Duo, after leaving the inner palace, should have been staying in the emperor's villa.

It was so. However.

Ah Duo looked over the documents she received, and her lips curved. It was more a sneer than a smile. She made that kind of face.

Since leaving the inner palace, she was here acting as Basen's master's body double. Though he said she was acting, it was no more than her just settling the work she received instead.

"There's nothing we can do. About this huh."

Ah Duo twirled the brush on her fingers.

He understood what she was trying to say. These documents should just be seen as merely for form's sake. On paper, if they just overlook each of them separately, the estimation would lower.

Ah Duo sorted the documents into two piles. Right or wrong, those two. It was fine to separate them, but they'll all be overlooked in the end. This was the duty of the incompetent decoration. If this were to continue for several years, wrong documents would increase in huge numbers just like this.

Eventually, you should just pick at it from a different place.

This was originally Basen's job.

He just sorted documents in the office where there were hardly any visitors. There was nothing interesting about it, but since it was his duty, there was nothing he could do about it.

Recently, since Ah Duo performed it instead, it became that Basen went out to accept a different job.

This too, it is often that normal was something different. For a job of a military officer he originally wanted to follow, there was a large opening.

He bore with it. There was nothing he could do with it nonetheless.

There were few who knew the real form of the crown prince.

Because he thought that, there came the worth to do it.

He bragged that he was a person who was worthy of that much trust.

And yet.

He wondered what Father was thinking.

His father. He recalled the man who currently assumed the name 'Gaoshun'. Not just Gaoshun, he even had objections regarding his master.

Why were they trying to win over such a girl?

It was mystifying. He couldn't hold it in, and when he found himself asking his father,

his father made quite a delicate expression. *For what reason*, he got hit when he tried to approach the girl herself the next time.

Afterwards, he heard from the explanation he got from his father, that it was more convenient in various ways to keep the girl close at hand. He heard that she knew a lot about pharmacy from beforehand, but he thought if it was like that there was no need to specifically have her close.

However.

He was told that girl was descendent of the 'Ra¹' family.

When he heard that, Basen inadvertently shrank back.

In this country, aside from surname and name, there is a single character conferred that denoted the family. This was mainly possessed by families that had served the emperor for generations. It was often the case that the males of direct descent are conferred that single character in their name.

In Basen's case, 'Ba²'. It was a name was bestowed from the emperor several generations ago. It was used by Basen, his older brother, and in Gaoshun's original name.

Speaking of the 'Ra' family in question, it was a lineage that had been around since ancient times. It was mostly a family that turned out a great number of military officers, but they also manifested all types of talents aside from that. In the history of this country, Rii, all had turned out to be prodigies.

Their orientation was wide-ranging. It changes greatly according to the person's interests.

Depending on the interest of the person in question, what you understand from that, was that the prodigies of the "Ra" family had many eccentrics.

The current clan head, Rakan, was a weirdo that was ridiculed as the tactician. You cannot predict his actions. He is a person who constantly wanders around the imperial court looking for amusements, but his ability is guaranteed. In regards to discerning talented people, his eyes were sharper than anyone. The talented people he took up, every one of them, were people who can be acknowledged as superiors in their field.

This eccentric man had no thoughts of joining factions.

He only thinks of whether it is amusing or whether he is interested in it.

You don't want to get near this man, however, it is just better to not have him around as an enemy. That was the unspoken agreement in the imperial court.

And, speaking of this man's relatives, he only had a nephew that he adopted as his son. He wasn't married either. That was what Basen heard.

However, this man actually had a daughter, and moreover, it was said that he doted on her.

When he heard that the daughter was this girl, Basen couldn't shut his opened mouth.

And at the same time, he understood.

The 'Ra' clan turns out a great number of prodigies. On the other hand, it seems that many of them have something lacking as a human.

To say it this way, Rakan also. He, whatever he was thinking, suddenly on a certain day, drove his father who was the clan head at the time and his younger brother out of the family. The two expelled people were relatively decent for the 'Ra' Clan – that is, they were incompetent. As for the nephew, he was more profitable to follow Rakan, and became his adopted son.

The heavens, in compensation for gifting superior talent, might have granted them fatal weaknesses.

If this kind of man doted on his daughter, he wanted to tilt his head, but on the other hand, he could also understand. Feelings were sometimes one-sided.

Currently, there were several factions in the imperial court. Among those, the ones that throw their weight around is the clan of Shishou who was favoured from the era of the empress.

Honestly, he had to be an existence that is a thorn in the side of the emperor. Since the splinter from the era of the previous emperor was left as it is.

What should he do with the fellow who grew fat in the previous era? That came to his head.

What would happen if the fellow won over that man of the neutral faction into his camp in the imperial court?

The significance of his influence wouldn't change that greatly. However, his impression would change greatly.

In a certain meaning, it was logical. However, he felt there would be more troublesome issues beyond that.

Basen recalled his master from after the falconry.

Dizzy from being affected by the strong sunlight, his master left in the middle of the party. He thought he would return afterwards in a better condition, but his expression was worse than when he left. It was as if all his vitality was completely sucked up by a revenant, he was making that kind of face.

Behind him who was walking unsteadily, there was a girl who was clutching into some mushroom with great importance for some reason. Although she made a complicated expression, sometimes, when she gazed at the mushroom in her hands, her expression eased.

Just what happened? It wasn't Basen who could ask that.

What he could only say was, as far as his master's gaze followed, the cause of his exhaustion was the girl. The question of whether it was a good thing to have this girl by his master's side arose.

This cannot be left at it is.

As Basen thought that, he put the documents that Ah Duo had sorted in order.

CHAPTER 21

GHOST STORY (1)

A couple of days after coming back from falconry, the new maids that had been mentioned before had arrived. There were three new people in the Jade Palace. With the exception of Maomao, they were acquaintances.

(Hmhm.)

Maomao looked at the three maids with her eyes squinted. And she thought right away.

(I can't match their names with their faces.)

From the start, Maomao's memory is only good for things she is interested in. And so, it would be difficult for her to speak to the newly entered maids for a while.

Well, Maomao originally didn't speak that much, *I'll just gradually learn it*, so she went to clean up.

The problem before all that-.

"Maomao. Properly return to your room."

Both hands on her waist, it was Infa who declared it.

"You told me that my room is here."

Maomao said, trying to cling to the storage shed that was in the garden of the Jade Palace. The compounding tools and lots of dried medicinal herbs were placed inside there. Even though she had finally brought them all here from her room. *What am I to do with the bracket fungus and ten thousand year mushroom I gathered a few days ago after this?* She thought.

"That's obviously a joke! And yet you took it as truth."

Don't set a bad example for the new maids, she scolded.

“No problem. I want to just use this as it is.”

“I told you that you can’t! Come on, aren’t the new maids looking at you with weird eyes!”

And this way, Maomao who was clinging to the pillar of the shed and Infa who was dragging her created a strange spectacle.

If two court ladies did such a thing, the head maid Honnyan wouldn’t be silent, and the two received friendly fists together.



In the end, Maomao had to return to her former room.

However, Honnyan, who had seen the large volume of compounding tools and the many medicinal herbs, had seemingly reported it to the master, Consort Gyokuyou, out of duty. The consort, who liked amusements, while laughing pleasantly, had allowed her to use the shed however she liked.

She was told that she must to use her room for sleep, but everything else, in particular, was as she pleased.

What a nice boss, Maomao thought, and as expected, Infa looked dissatisfied. She looked at Maomao who started to work cheerily in the storage shed. The tea parties were also over; there were no jobs until dinner time. Since three new maids had entered, the work in the Jade Palace had noticeably decreased.

(This is not good.)

Infa’s proposal was meddlesome for Maomao, but she was thinking about Maomao. So she could quickly get used to the new court ladies, she probably said that. Today when they were having snacks, she recklessly tried to insert Maomao to talk with the new maids.

Infa was a considerate girl like this.

Maomao placed down the bracket fungus she was holding onto, and stealthily looked at Infa from the storage shed.

“...My apologies. I’ve just been doing as I pleased.”

“It’s fine.”

As Infa said that, her lips were pouted.

Maomao, while hiding with half her body behind the wall, peeked at Infa.

“...It’s fine.”

Infa said, holding between the wall and faced Maomao.

And then—.

“I’ll have you accompany me for a bit today.”

She firmly grabbed Maomao’s wrist, and an evil smile appeared on her face.

(Oh no.)

“Just now, the ones free tonight is just Maomao and me! Just as well—”

She shook Maomao’s hand she was holding onto with a truly playful tone.

(I’ve been done.)

As Maomao sighed deeply, she looked at the calculative maid.



That night, the place she was led to was an old building located on the south side of the inner palace. She was worried about whether Honnyan would allow them to go outside at night, but unexpectantly, the head maid readily passed down her permission.

“Occasionally, you should participate in something like this.”

(What is this something?)

Just what could this be? Maomao thought as she followed.

They walked relying on small lantern lights. The lukewarm wind was gross, the sounds of insects by her ears were noisy, but she couldn't complain.

"Here, Maomao. Wear this."

Infa said. The thing she held out to Maomao before the entrance was a thin cloth.

"Isn't it hot?"

"It's fine. It'll get cold. Come on."

While tilting her head, Maomao did as she was told.

Infa knocked on the entrance, and a court lady appeared from the inside.

"Welcome. Two participants, right?"

"Yes, please take care of us."

"Best regards."

Maomao followed Infa, also lowering her head. The court lady who greeted them, passed over small candles to the two of them while smiling. She told them to put out the lantern in turn.

The inside of the building looked just as old as the outside. More than saying that it got old from the passing of the long months and years, she felt it got suddenly damaged by the lack of residence. The barest minimum of cleaning was done, but the fittings were bad at places, and the floor creaked.

"This place was used during the era of the previous emperor."

I see now, Maomao thought.

The current inner palace seemed like a large family, but the previous era had way more court ladies. The women had been gathered from all over the country to bear the emperor's children and were imprisoned here.

In the present times where the court ladies had decreased, the places that are no longer used are sometimes utilised like this.

And, speaking of what it is used for-.

At the end of the hallway, when they entered the common room, there were already ten-odd guests who had arrived before them. Sitting around in a circle, all were wearing the cloth. The flickering candles each person was holding was somehow an eerie spectacle.

Speaking of what they were doing in the midsummer night.

Coming up to this point, she had a pretty good idea.

“Well then, shall we begin?”

The court lady who welcomed them at the entrance sat down.

“Has everyone properly prepared their stories?”

The court lady said, holding out lots made from pieces of a stick.

“Let us we enjoy the stories that will chill thirteen guts tonight.”

Grinning, she looked very much eerie in the flickering flame.

Turns out, the ghost stories seem to be starting from this point onwards.



The arrangement was four people at the cardinal points, and two people between each space.

Maomao yawned as she hid half her face under the cloth. The first story, maybe because she was nervous about being the first speaker, was incoherent and didn't have much presence. The story was also the standard of an inner palace rumour, so it didn't go as far as to chill her guts.

When the second person started, Maomao's right side was poked. Infa was on her left side.

“Good evening—”

“Good evening.”

It was a muffled, innocent tone. The person who was wearing the cloth over her head was someone Maomao recognised.

It was Shisui, the court lady who got excited at insects from the other day. It seems she hadn't noticed her in the darkness.

Shisui presented something to the sleepy Maomao. She had thought it smelt like the ocean – it was cuttlefish.

“Eating?”

“Give.”

Maomao ate the tentacles, chewing slowly so she wouldn't make a sound.

The second story was also an extremely commonplace ghost story. There was nothing particularly interesting about it, but since she had a different intonation to the story than the first story, there were a number of scared people. Infa next to her also wore the cloth over her head and listened while hiding her face at times.

It was fine if it was just that, but she occasionally stuck close to Maomao like she was clinging to her. She was unexpectedly strong for her short height, she occasionally got choked.

(She likes it even though she's scared.)

It wasn't that strange. Seeing as how she invited Maomao, she must have been scared to go alone.

She didn't think that she didn't like these type of engagements, but it seems that it was approved to a certain extent in the inner palace that hardly had any amusements. In truth, Honnyan also gave her permission and Shisui, who was a court lady from Consort Rouran's place, was also here. Though, in the case of Shisui, Maomao thought that she would have shown her face even if she didn't get permission.

Just like that, half were finished. The distributed lights were snuffed out one by one whenever a story ended – there were half left. The seventh story began, and Maomao listened in a daze as she nibbled on cuttlefish.

The storyteller began her tale with the flickering flame lighting up her pale features.



This, was a story from my hometown. My hometown had a forest where we were told since olden times that we mustn't enter.

We were told that if we entered, we would get cursed, and our souls would get eaten by ghosts.

But, one time, there were people who broke the taboo.

That year, it seemed that the harvest was bad. Still, it wasn't as bad as a famine, but there was a family where the breadwinner had just died, leaving behind a mother and her child.

Everyone didn't have the means to help them either. It seems the child was always hungry.

So then, one day, it seems that the child, having nothing to eat, went into the taboo forest.

The child, smiling, gathered fruits and went back home.

They told their mother, "There's a lot of food in that forest."

The mother forbade the child from speaking of that, but it was too late. They ended up being summoned by the village head and warned to not enter the taboo grounds.

On top of that, something strange happened.

That night, there were people who saw swaying lights coming out from the house of the mother and child.

And then, the next day, the mother and child collapsed.

The villagers who feared the curse did not approach them. In the end, the mother and child died.

When the child died, the mother, before she passed away, seemed to have said this.

“Hey, I’ve got something good to tell you.”

Smiling as she tried to tell something, the mother died just like that.

In the end, without knowing what she wanted to say, the forest once again became a place of taboo.

Even now, we were still told that forest is taboo.

Nevertheless, when there are people that broke the taboo, that night, disembodied souls will enter the house, and take away the souls of the family.



(Ah, I see.)

Maomao listened to the story that wasn’t really interesting and strangely understood. There wasn’t any scary punch to it, but everyone was trembling as they listened. It was probably due to the atmosphere.

She drank the cuttlefish that had gotten soft in her mouth with a gulp, and matching that, she was presented with more cuttlefish.

“You’re making quite a strangely indifferent face.”

Shisui said with a muffled voice.

She was also like Maomao; she didn’t appear scared of the ghost stories.

“I guess so.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

Even if I spoiled it here for you now, it’ll just kill the entertainment, Maomao told Shisui.

In this world, even gossip has more or less an origin.

CHAPTER 22

GHOST STORY (2)

Maomao listened in a daze as the stories went on in succession. Infa, sitting to her left, was clutching her hand and whenever there was something, she drew close clinging.

(She's still growing huh, no, has she stopped?)

She thought that with the sensation of it pressing up against her. During that, the turns had passed to the person beside her.

Maomao rubbed her sleepy eyes. She was somehow sluggish and sleepy. There were ten-odd people gathered in the small room. Everyone must have paid attention to their body odour and all lit incenses. Maomao, who had a good sense of smell, became slightly intoxicated.

Shisui took down the cloth she covered up to her head and brought the fire to her face. Her face that was comparatively young for her height, was plain, but had a strange intensity when illuminated by the flickering flame.

"This is a story from a distant country in the east."

Shisui deepened her innocent voice as she began her tale. Her intonation gradually changed from a young girl to a wizened narrator.



In a certain country, there was a famous monk. The feudal lord of the neighbouring country had passed away; he was going there to hold a memorial service. This was what happened during his journey back home.

He needed to cross two mountains to reach his own temple. Since it wasn't a journey that he could make in a single day, the monk decided to stay at a lodging.

His journey there was good. The weather was clear, and the travel was quite favourable. Along the way, a well-known monk was letting him stay in his temple.

Did I make a mistake?

The monk thought. He should be following the same path as the journey there, but his legs were strangely heavy on his return. He hadn't reached the temple he was staying in tonight that he was expected to reach two thirds to the sun setting.

The monk was in the pursuit of knowledge. He didn't have followers with him. He didn't have a horse either.

His surroundings were plains that were full of pampas grass, even if he were to camp, he could hear stray dogs howling. He wasn't one to endure being attacked by a group.

The monk who was walking quickly chanced upon an old private house. He ceased his steps and knocked on the door of the thatched house.

Excuse me. May have I have a bit of your attention?

It was a young couple who came out. The monk talked about his circumstances and asked if he could stay for a single night. Even the corner of a shed was fine.

Oh my, in that case, you must be tired from your travels.

The young wife welcomed the monk. *This is nothing much*, the eggplant and cucumber she took out were very much delicious.

In response to that, the husband stared at the monk with a dubious look.

It can't be helped that the traveller nonchalantly stepped into the house of the young couple.

The monk had few things on hand. He only happened to have the barest minimum for his travels.

Despite this, the couple treated him as a guest and prepared a bed in a different room.

While thinking he was thankful for the soft futon, the monk wondered if there was anything he could do.

And then, what he could do, thinking that he could provide them sutras, he began to chant.

Usually, he would be deep in concentration from the beginning to the end of his chanting, but today he was strangely conscious of the sounds outside.

Aside from the sounds of the pampas grass swaying in the wind, he heard something that sounded like a bell.

Insects?

As the monk chanted the sutra, he listened intently.

In doing so, he understood that the bell sounds were human voices.

What are you doing, my dear?

It was the voice of wife of this house.

I'm not doing anything. Isn't this fine?

The bell-like voice was the husband's.

What a strange voice, the monk thought. However, he never stopped chanting even once.

You can't do that, my dear. I don't want to be alone.

The wife raised her voice.

It seems they were speaking without intending to be heard, but the monk's hearing was more superior to people. While thinking that it wasn't good to strain his ears, he tried to concentrate on his sutra, but he heard the voices still.

Even if you plan for that, it was I who did it.

What are you going to do?

A chill ran down the monk's spine.

Should he stop his sutra and go stop the two-quarrelling people? Or should he?

No, don't stop the sutra. It's better to not stop. *Why*, the monk thought.

Why is that? His entire body was chilled. It was like even his head that had long been

smooth from being shaven were growing goosebumps.

Why is this?

Well, I'm doing it.

The badly fitted sliding screen door slid open.

There was a woman with goggling eyes holding onto a hatchet.

The monk only moved his eyeballs, his mouth continued to chant the sutra.

Where did he go, that monk?

The woman crossed the front of the monk with a rustling sound.

However, she didn't notice the monk.

Where is he? Did he run away?

The woman left the room.

The stretched shadowed made a strange shape. At the very least, it wasn't a shadow that could be considered as human. It overlapped with a yet another strange shadow.

Search, you, go search. If you don't, if you don't.

The woman was impatient. What was she impatient about?

I will...

He heard a bell ringing.

What continued that sound was a chewing sound like crumpling paper.

The chewing sound continued.

During that, the monk continued to chant the sutra.

He chanted, and with the ending of the sound, he went outside.

He didn't greet the young couple, he didn't make eye contact with them, he went out of the house.

The wings of a pale brown insect fell.

Ring. Ring.

The insect sounds he heard from the pampas grass, disappeared.

The monk put his hands together over the tattered insect wings, and while chanting the sutra, continued to walk until daybreak.



The delivery of the story is important, Maomao thought.

Everyone was engrossed in Shisui's story.

She usually spoke in an innocent manner, but she was truly like a different person when she was telling a story. From the side, even her face that was illuminated by the flame looked like a different person.

(I have a feeling that I actually have seen her before.)

She had also thought it before, but she still couldn't recall who.

As Maomao absentmindedly gazed at Shisui's side profile, the girl grinned and looked at her. The girl blew out the candle in her hands, placed the oil and wick inside the brazier and put it away.

"Next, you're next."

Shisui smiled sweetly.

Ah, that's right, Maomao nodded. If she came to such a place, she must also tell a story.

(What should I tell?)

Honestly, Maomao didn't believe in these things. Therefore, since an interesting story didn't occur to her, as a last resort, she decided to tell a story she heard from her dad a long time ago.

“This is something from a couple of decades ago. There is a story of the will-of-the-wisps coming out of graves.”

Maybe because Maomao was the speaker, Infa scooted away from Maomao and covered herself with the cloth with only her eyes showing.

“Saying it is really strange, there were brave young people who went to seek the real form of the will-of-the-wisps. And in doing so,”

Infa looked at Maomao with her lips in a zigzag. *If you're scared, you should just cover your eyes*, Maomao thought.

Unfortunately, Maomao's story wasn't the ghost story that people were anticipating.

“There was no such thing. It was the men who lived in the same town who went to the graveyard. The wavering lights were only what someone had called the will-of-the-wisp.”

Was that all, Infa sighed in relief.

“They only just disturbed the grave for a bit.”

With a thump, Infa's forehead collided onto Maomao's shoulder. Infa's gaze bore into Maomao.

“Grave disturbing, you say.”

“Yes. Like they were falling into a questionable curse, they mashed human guts and coated their bodies with it...”

With yet another thump, this time Infa's forehead hit Maomao's forehead. As Maomao rubbed her forehead, she finished the tale with a “That is all.”

Infa's turn was next, but she finished it incoherently, and then it was the final candle that was left.

The court lady who had welcomed them at the start was waiting with the final candle.

(That said.)

The court ladies were lined-up in a way where there was one in each of the four points with two people between them. There should be twelve people altogether.

But, didn't this court lady mention at the beginning that there were "Thirteen stories"?

What is that supposed to mean? Maomao wondered.

The court lady told a story from the era of the previous emperor. It was a story of a girl who became one of the handfuls of mistresses among the overly increased number of court ladies.

It just couldn't come to head. She was dizzy.

In a daze, Maomao looked at the brazier that was set in front of her.

(Huh?)

The court lady said some scary punch, everyone was shuddering, but Maomao didn't hear it properly.

"Well then, and this is the thirteenth's story."

When the court lady was going to hand it to the next, it was when the brazier, the final fire, was going to fall.

Maomao stood up and went to open the closed window.

"Hey, Maomao!"

Infa went to stop Maomao, but Maomao wasn't going to stop there.

Wind suddenly rushed in; the cloths everyone was wearing fluttered.

Maomao breathed in the newly entered air and breathed out.

(I thought my mind was blank.)

The extinguished fire was put into the brazier. There was coal inside. The fire that

remained continued burning there.

In a small enclosed room, coal was burning with incomplete combustion. If that was completed, what would happen?

Maomao rushed over to the senseless court lady who was among those who were encircling the brazier and slapped her face a couple of times. She then took her to a place that has fresh air.

Seeing that, as if she grasped the situation, Infa went to help Maomao.

If you burn a fire in a place that doesn't have enough air, it will release a gas that will harm the human body.

It seems her head was blank because of that.

(I was too slow to realise.)

While wondering why she didn't notice it earlier, she thought that the organiser did something bad.

Maomao went towards the court lady, but there was no one there.

"...Ah, it was just a little bit more."

She heard that voice, but the court lady was nowhere to be seen.



"Hey, what is it about that story from just then?"

Hazily, after the closure of the event, Shisui asked.

Infa tilted her head, "Who is this child?" Shisui seemed to be happy with wearing the cloth, she continued to cover herself with it.

"The previous one, is it?"

It was the story of the will of the wisps. It seems she remembered that Maomao said that she would explain it later.

"The taboo forest thing might be a superstition. But, I can't declare that the saying is completely impossible."

For example, in the case that there are a lot of dangers in that forest. The forest was abundant with food, but at the same time, it is also abundant with things cannot be eaten.

Hypothetically, what if the origins of the taboo forest saying came from that? If we take that it was a village that only had people who came from other lands. You cannot recklessly that take the food that is there, it will damage the body. That saying, in the passing of time, could have become 'Taboo'.

And then, simply due to them abiding by those instructions, it could become that they couldn't differentiate between what in the forest could be eaten or not.

In which, she could make such a conjecture.

Due to the poor harvest, the starving mother and child tried to eat the bounty of the abundant forest. However, they broke the village's law. That's why they snuck themselves into the forest.

The evening, though there was still light, was a time where it was difficult to see your surroundings. They used that short period of time to enter the forest, and gathered mushrooms, fruits and nuts.

And then, they returned home at the same time as the sun set.

While not knowing exactly what it was that they harvested.

"There's a mushroom that is called moonlight mushroom."

By speaking of mushrooms, Maomao's face twisted for an instant, but she paid no heed to it and continued speaking.

"It's a mushroom that looked very delicious, but it is poisonous. You'll upset your stomach if you eat it. And, as its name suggests, it has a curious trait."

When it gets dark, it'll cast light. Its appearance is very beautiful. So beautiful that she recalled that when she subconsciously picked it and put it in her mouth she was forced by her dad to vomit it out.

The mother and child harvested before the mushrooms glowed, and while not

knowing that it glows, they walked home in the dark. The light that spilt from their basket, might have been seen as will-of-the-wisps from a distance.

And then, if they reach home and turn on the lights, the shine will go out, and if they eat that – that was how it is.

Even if it was a poison that won't normally kill you, what would happen if they were malnourished people? The child died, and the mother died too.

And then, what the mother wanted to say at the end.

(There are delicious mushrooms in the forest.)

Was what she might have even wanted to say. As a mere revenge to the villagers who didn't help the mother and child.

“So that's what it *is*—”

Shisui, with a look of satisfaction, ruffled the cloth.

“Well then, I'm going this *way*—”

She pitter-pattered away like a child as she said it.

I can't speak for others, but she has a self-willed personality, Maomao thought.

“Humph, it wasn't something significant.”

Infa changed from the atmosphere she had up until now and largely puffed out her small chest.

“Turns out that the other stories have such a reverse side to it.”

“I wonder.”

Maomao and Infa trudged back to the Jade Palace.



“Oh, you’re back earlier than I expected.”

It was Honnyan who waited for them. She was doing needlework.

“Yes, there was a bit of a commotion.”

“My. I knew it.”

Honnyan said, understanding for some reason.

“The court lady who did it from up until last year had died. I was worried who would take over this year.”

Honnyan put down the needle and sighed deeply.

“She was a sensible court lady and had taken care of me as well. In the end, she ended without leaving the inner palace.”

Maomao looked at Infa’s face. Her brave face was gradually turning pale.

“Umm, who was this court lady?”

“...This story stays here. She was a mistress of the previous emperor. I’m not really fond of this, but it is boorish to stop it if it was done for enjoyment. That’s why, you know, because she died that following year, I wondered if it would suddenly stop, but I’m happy that there are people continuing it.”

Honnyan packed up the sewing tools into the lacquered box and went to her bedroom yawning.

When she thought that she had heard something like this before, she realised that it was similar to the ghost story that the organising court lady had told. Maomao didn’t remember the details, but, just by seeing Infa’s complexion, she could guess it was just like that.

(Hm.)

Maomao crossed her arms and tilted her head.
There are many uncertain things in the world.

For now, it's a relief that we finished without getting to the thirteenth story, she thought.

Just that, that night, a terrified Infa shared the bed with her. It was hot and she wasn't able to sleep properly.

CHAPTER 23

MAHUA

It was when the sounds of cricket became more conspicuous than cicadas.

As usual, Maomao was lazing about in the washing area. Close to the pool, just where there was sunlight filtering through the trees, was the place where the maidservants had designated as their chatting area. Amid the bit of hotness that still remained, the passing wind was refreshing.

Today's snacks were the mahua she had received from Consort Gyokuyou as leftovers. It was something that had a shape of twisted rope. It was a high-class item that had crunchy powdered sugar inside.

"Hey, about the Consort-sama from Maomao's place."

As usual, Shaoran, who was speaking as she was crunching on it scrumptiously, was in the middle of chatting with Maomao.

"Could it be that, she is unwell with something?"

(I thought it was about time the subject would come up.)

Consort Gyokuyou's abdomen has gotten so large that she was no longer able to hide it no matter how she tries. With the number of tea parties decreased, there must be people who paid attention to that she hasn't gone outside either. Even if they don't know about her pregnancy, there had to be those who think there was something about it that's disquieting.

Maomao displayed her tilting her head as she crunched on the mahua.

No one around them had noticed their conversation. Maomao took about another package of mahua from her bosom.

"Eating?"

“Eating!”

Maomao considered how she could cover it up as she looked at Shaoran who was stuffing her cheeks with snacks.

She recalled something fitting now what she thought it up.

“You know about the ghost story meeting in the inner palace at night?”

“Ah, I know, I know! It seems something came out.”

Gossip really is fast, Maomao admired.

“I heard, the one who came out was the court lady who died here. She was already considerably old, but it seems there was a reason she couldn’t leave.”

It seems, she didn’t know about the fine details of that part.

Maomao thought it might be boorish to reveal it, she just nodded with sounds of agreement, when she saw a hand sneak out from the side for the mahua.

“This looks delicious. Can I eat it?”

“You’re already eating it.”

The one crunching on Maomao’s snack was Shisui. Maomao was already full, so she gave the rest to her. Shisui raised her voice in happiness.

Shisui’s attire today was duty robes, in other words, she was wearing the same washing duty garments as Shaoran.

(I wonder where she got that from.)

Since she is a court lady attached to Consort Rouran, her garments should have been supplied from elsewhere. However, it could be rude if she said that maidservant robes suited Shisui more for some reason.

“So, ghost story?”

“That ghost story.”

Shisui, who wasn't shy, very naturally inserted herself into the conversation. Shoran, who was the same, also took it naturally. *What a difficult feat*, Maomao admired.

"It's the story of the court lady who died in the inner palace."

"It's that. It's the court lady who wasn't able to get out of the inner palace in the end."

"Eh? You know about it? What kind of story is it!?"

Shisui mentioned what Maomao refrained from saying. Besides, it wasn't Shaoran who didn't get into it.

"Let's see. It was said that she couldn't get out with the reason being that she became the previous emperor's mistress, but it wasn't like that in truth."

Maomao's ears twitched, thinking, "Huh?" She tilted her head. For some reason, the story was a little different to what she had heard from Honnyan.

Shaoran stared at Shisui as she was chewing. Shisui put on airs, saying, "How should I say *this*—", and started the story.

"It's a famous story though. The previous emperor had a bit of a problematic taste—"

He possessed no interest in any type of women. The empress, the empress dowager at the time, being exasperated, had rapidly enlarged the inner palace to see what kind of women he was interested in.

And then, one day, it was said that she said this to a retainer.

Hand over your daughter.

A maiden that was well-known even in the capital as a peerless beauty.

It was everything he desired for the retainer, a good foothold for promotion. However, for his daughter, it was something unbearable.

She already had a betrothed, but she couldn't defy the empress' orders, so she entered court with several maids.

Everyone leaked a sigh at her beauty. If it was like that, it was thought that the emperor would also be satisfied.

However.

“The one he laid his hands on was a maid of hers. Moreover, it was an innocent eleven-year-old girl.”

Hearing that, Shaoran’s face contorted.

Even Maomao, who has heard that story before, had a strong reaction against it.

The reason he didn’t move his finger at the beauty, was because she was overgrown.

How much of her pride had been torn?

Afterwards, that maid was promoted. It was a short time when she even got her own palace. The emperor, who lost interest in the maid who then grew up laid his hands on a new court lady. Wherever it could have been heard of, it became that young girls were sent to the inner palace in succession.

The forgotten maid lived forsaken in the inner palace.

“When the emperor passed away, she could leave the inner palace.”

The outside wasn’t the maid’s place to go.

As she was embarrassed towards the master she serves, it was said that she passed her remaining years in the inner palace, without ever returning to her hometown.

It was said that she lived with just the trivial amusement of gathering scary stories as provisions.

“And that was the story!”

Even though she spoke in a gloomy tone up until now, Shisui finished it in a strangely casual note.

Unusually, Shaoran had a depressed expression.

“That’s kinda, pitiful. It wasn’t that person’s fault, wasn’t it!”

Shaoran puffed her mouth largely.

That was true. She didn’t have the means to oppose. However, that was a prevalent absurdity in this world. The ones that have it have it, the ones that don’t don’t, that was all.

“I know *right*—. Nothing could be done even if she resented *it*—“

Shisui, who declared it in a casual tone, put all the remaining mahua in her mouth, chewed a couple of times, and swallowed.

“Mm, but then, after that, the beauty who wasn’t chosen was bestowed to a certain high official. You know about the ‘Blade’ of the North?”

“Bleid?”

Shaoran tilted her head.

Maomao also thought *What?* in the beginning, but then she recalled the story she heard from Basen the other day. It was the country called Rii that had three Blades underneath the Flower. The Blade of the North signified Shishou, in other words, Consort Rouran’s father.

(The high official who received a bestowed woman huh.)

While feeling the cause and effect, as it was about time she had to work, Maomao jumped off from the wooden box.



Gaoshun entered the dim office with a sigh.

“Please put on some light at least.”

A withered nobleman was slumped over the office desk.

“This much is good enough.”

Jinshi, the nobleman, while looking at the documents with a sidelong glance, stamped a seal of approval with a lack of motivation. He was working, for the time being, but he was extremely slow. Amid that, other work piled up in succession.

Gaoshun, while wondering what he should do, decided to give a report on his own work.

“This is from the caravan incident from the other day. They don’t have a connection with Shin.”

Shin, Consort Rifa’s former head maid, was currently in her hometown. As she was officially dismissed on the grounds of a falling out with Consort Rifa, it was difficult to even investigate for detailed information. And above all, since it was also Consort Rifa’s birthplace, it was difficult to make a move at a moment’s notice.

“It seems this was the cause of the matter she raised.”

Gaoshun placed the thing Shin had finally handed over after visiting her several times over on the office desk. It was a piece of paper that had a great number of the names of perfume oil and spices written on it. Unexpectedly, Shin had known about the fact that several were ingredients that had an abortion effect. And it was said that she gathered these ingredients because of that.

Shin had denied that she had gathered them. It wasn’t known if that was true, but at least, seeing how she didn’t have a connection with the caravans, nothing could be said.

That they were able to investigate must be due to Consort Rifa’s cooperation. She was quite quick concerning abortion medicine. She had wished that such things wouldn’t appear in the inner palace hereafter.

Without considering that those appearing would be more advantageous for herself.

For that aspect, Gaoshun had thought it was favourable. That it is likely that if this kind of person became the mother of the country, the government would be even better.

On the other hand, he thought that she didn’t have the determination to just maintain that seat.

Even if she didn't have to go as far as to beat down people, she needed to the strength to simply protect her own position.

For that point, it is possible to say that Consort Gyokuyou was more superior.

"Also, she didn't have a connection with Consort Gyokuyou either."

"Is that so."

Jinshi said, raising his face

That's a relief, it was a phrasing as if to add that.

Was it coincidence or certainty, that someone could have transported the ingredients for abortion medicine in the caravans? If it was certainty, they needed to thoroughly investigate the root cause.

It didn't matter whether the victim was a high ranked consort or not.

In particular, Consort Gyokuyou was from a western trading city. It was valid to think she had a deeper connection than anyone else.

Once again, Jinshi started stamping with his face flat against the desk.

Stop that already, Gaoshun pressed down in the wrinkles on his brow.

As it cannot be helped, he decided to take out the wonder drug.

"Jinshi-sama, I got a notice of stock from the merchant who sold the grass that grew from insects from before."

At Gaoshun's words, Jinshi's face snapped up. For Gaoshun, it was a face that seemed like an irresponsible child, but others would see it as a captivating face imbued with gloominess so it was troubling.

"It's said it can only be found in a single ox among a thousand. It appears to be a stone found in the gallbladder. It's called 'bezoar', a precious natural medicine."

"..."

Jinshi's eyes gradually sharpened.

"Is that true?"

"It is likely not a fake article. A physician with a good eye had looked over it for me. However, they said there was only one since it was an unusual item."

"Buy it."

Jinshi said like it was obvious.
Somehow, it seems his spirit rose.

He is a master that is easy to understand, yet also hard to comprehend.

"The merchant hasn't set the price yet."

Gaoshun said, and Jinshi slowly curved his lips.

"It should be cheaper compared to drinking wine throughout the night, served by the prostitutes in the best brothel in the capital."

Gaoshun made a wry smile at Jinshi who asserted that simply.

"Certainly. I'll prepare it. Also..."

I have to say this much, Gaoshun looked at Jinshi.

"Your line just then, I think it's better you don't say that in front of Shaomao."

To say that as a reason, *Don't spend pointless tax,* he informed him.

CHAPTER 24

MISDIAGNOSIS

“Oh, lass. Long time no see.”

When Maomao went to the medical office, the quack doctor with the loach moustache came to greet her. It must be her imagination that he looked like he was on the lookout for her, for some reason.

“To say long time no see is a bit...”

Hasn't it been around three days since she last came here? Maomao had showed up that time because the quack doctor said that the paper supply from his family was coming in. She had shrewdly considered that if it goes well, she could get the remainders.

“Oh really? You used to come here every day. Haven't you stopped coming by for a bit recently?”

The quack doctor said it forlornly, but the time she came every day was to clean the medical office. Even though he looked refreshed when they were done.

First off, it was true that her visits have decreased. Lately, she has been spending a lot of time chatting in the washing area. She usually only spoke to Shaoran. It must be because Consort Rouran's court lady, Shisui, had joined in with them as of late.

(She really is an incomprehensible girl.)

She had no idea what kind of person Consort Rouran is, but she thought that she must be quite a big-shot to employ such a court lady. The girl mentioned that she had a bit of knowledge about medicine, though she wasn't an expert as she only knew about simple doses.

In the beginning, when Maomao heard that the girl had knowledge of medicine, she subconsciously bent her brows, but she paid no heed to it now.

In the beginning, she thought that Shisui must be joining in with them frequently to

listen to suspicious stories, but at any rate, this girl is too incomprehensible.

Even yesterday, she was chasing after a court lady who was nearby to show her the cricket she caught.

She didn't know anything about Consort Rouran, but at the very least, Shisui didn't have interest in the mire of the inner palace. If there was something the girl would pay attention to, she would seem to be the type to observe an ant nest for days on end. The part where she wasn't interested in the love affairs of inferiors was something Maomao could agree with.

"For now, have this."

Maomao took out dried medicinal herbs from the washing basket. It was the things that were mentioned to have run out when she came by recently. Though he is a quack doctor, his title is pretty much a medical officer. He boasted that he could personally make abdominal pain medicine at least. She hasn't heard anything about other medicines. Maomao still was kind enough to not ask. She wanted to take the opportunity to get the leftovers.

The quack doctor accepted the medicinal herbs, then went to dig around the shelves and briskly started to prepare tea.

"Fufufu, I have good snacks today."

The quack doctor prepared tea snacks as his thin moustache swung like it was dancing.

He doesn't even have snacks for tea, Maomao thought, but the quack doctor looked like he was having fun for some reason. The snacks he just mentioned, wasn't that kind of tea snacks, it was material for talk, Maomao thought.

Maomao kept silent and sat, holding in her mouth the blended tea that was poured. She stuffed her cheeks with roasted mochi that was seasoned with saltiness. The crunchy texture was tasty. Some green laver was added to give it a bit of flavour.

"What kind of snack is it?"

You have to tell me about the tea snacks you brought out at least, Maomao asked the

quack doctor.

The quack doctor smiled in delight and cleared his throat with a cough.

“I heard an interesting story. I wonder if lass understands it.”

The quack doctor smiled awfully confidently as he started the story.



In a certain estate, there was a medical officer and his three apprentices. The apprentices had the medical officer as their teacher, but all in all, none of them were outstanding pupils. One studied diligently, one was as he is, and the other was unmotivated and a liar. Since the medical officer's position was bought with money, it could not be helped that he had these kinds of pupils.

The medical officer, in regards to medicine, possessed wonderful knowledge. He never misdiagnosed, and he would not from hereafter either.

The diligent one hated mistakes and does not lie. The unmotivated one only ever lied. The last person mostly spoke the truth, but he occasionally makes mistakes.

One day, a terrible storm came upon the estate. The winds were strong; they could not go outside. During that, a certain incident occurred.

One of the apprentices hung down from the ceiling with a cord around his neck.

Everyone took him down in haste, but he had already stopped breathing.

The medical officer did away with the body of the apprentice as a death by suffocation.

The remaining apprentice was in a frenzy, saying that a person cannot do such a thing alone, and flared up at the medical officer. He shouted that that guy wasn't the type to commit suicide.

The other person kept silent and watched the other person, but when he returned to the room, he confirmed with the medical officer that, *So he suffocated*, before he left.

Everyone wanted to immediately leave the estate, but they could not leave because of the storm. Just like that, an evening passed, and the next day there was another

medical officer apprentice who hung his neck.

The surviving person asked the medical officer. *Why did he commit suicide?*

While shaking his head, the medical officer replied. *It was death from suffocation.*



“Well then, herein lies the problem. Which pupil was the one who survived?”

Hmm. The quack doctor said as he blew out of his nose.

Maomao scratched the back of her head.

(There are a lot of parts omitted.)

The quack doctor must be asking the question without understanding it. Even if he knew the answer, she felt that he didn’t comprehend the details well enough.

Even so, it was a problem that doesn’t have anything that cannot be understood.

In this case, judging the other person on whether he was the liar or not, there, was important.

“Does the medical officer lie?”

“...”

Seems he doesn’t know this prerequisite. In that case, Maomao changed her question.

“The medical officer doesn’t misdiagnose, right?”

Unlike this quack doctor.

“That’s right. He would never.”

He emphasised that part. In that case, the answer was simple.

“Then, the one who killed the two people was the medical officer, and the survivor

would have to be the apprentice who was neither a liar nor an honest person, right?”

“...”

Seeing how he's silent, it's bulls-eye, Maomao thought.

“...How did you know?”

With a sulky expression, the quack doctor asked.

“It was weird from the very beginning.”

The main point of this story was this certain character. It was the medical officer who was everyone's teacher. He was known to the culprit from the part where he – being the person who doesn't misdiagnose – said that it was a death from suffocation from the start.

Normally, death from hanging and constriction looks different. Maomao heard from her dad that people die from the weight of their entire body on their head. It was similar to hanging from a rope around the neck, but the way of dying is different.

From that, speaking of who was the apprentice who was in a frenzy, it was the student that wasn't any of the two. If he was the student who only speaks of truth, he wouldn't say that the answer of the teacher who doesn't misdiagnose was wrong. If it was the liar and unmotivated student, he wouldn't even be in a frenzy anyway.

And then, speaking of who is the other apprentice, it would have to be the diligent student. If he was the lying student, he wouldn't deny the answer of the teacher who should be right.

And then, the student who died the next day was also the diligent student.

The honest student wouldn't think of suicide, and the teacher also answered it was 'death from suffocation'.

The teacher said 'death from suffocation', but he didn't deny it was a suicide.

“To not lie only when autopsying, how difficult.”

Maomao said, and smoothly gulped down the rest of the tea.

“?”

As the quack doctor was going to ask himself a question, he turned his head. Maomao, seeing him do that, as she put the remaining mochi pieces in her mouth, flipped through the medical book that was in the medical office.

She had thought to continue with passing time indolently like this for a short while.

“So you were in such a place.”

She heard a deep man’s voice that she was used to hearing. When she turned around, Gaoshun with his usual wrinkled brows was there.

Normally, this man who was somehow relieving, but this time the circumstances were a little different.

She pretended to sip from an empty cup as she held back her spontaneous jumpiness, calming her heart.

“What do you require of me?”

No, it’s fine if there’s nothing. It’s fine, she thought as she looked at Gaoshun, but it didn’t seem to be that convenient.

“Jinshi-sama has summoned for you.”

Has it finally come? Maomao slumped her shoulders.

CHAPTER 25

SHI

The place where Jinshi summoned Maomao was the room of Palace Official Chief. As usual, Maomao dipped her head at the Palace Official Chief who had stepped out from her seat and went inside.

In the spacious yet simplistic room, Jinshi was comfortably sitting on the couch. What is this, his highness' face was more beautiful than usual, that is, he was sparkling pointlessly.

Maomao slowly lowered her head. There was the sound of Gaoshun closing the door behind her.

How many days has been since she seen Jinshi since that other day? That time, Jinshi was pale and said nothing. Maomao also asked nothing. She thought of asking but she couldn't ask for the details. Her head was full of the lingzhi she got her hands on. That was inevitable.

And so, for these couple of days, she was afraid that this eunuch, no, this pseudo-eunuch would show up at the Jade Palace someday, but to directly summon her-.

Maomao clutched the collar of her clothes.

"What is your business?"

Maomao prepared herself and spoke.

Seeing her doing that, Jinshi smiled widely.

"I thought about continuing from where we left off the other day."

(Is it really coming?)

Maomao took a deep breath.

What this man wanted to say. Maomao was anticipating.

“I understand.”

Maomao took out a cloth bag from her bosom.
She set it up on the table.

“I am properly prepared for it.”

Jinshi lightly tilted his head in response to Maomao’ stiff expression.

“...Umm, prepared for what?”

What is he playing dumb for, this man?
Maomao opened the bag and showed him.

“The compounding still imperfect, but it will be completed if we combine it with another medicine. The finished product would make you appear like you died from shock.”

The one other medicine couldn’t be obtained here, so she will have to get Jinshi prepare it for her. He should do that much for her. It’s a medicine that has some value in a foreign country, but that’s why it was something that wouldn’t leave proof.

Listen to her final wish.
Let her die by medicine she wanted to try out.

It looks like she hadn’t thought about it, but even Maomao has thought about her own death.

If she must really die, then let her die in the manner she likes.

It’s only just a trivial wish.

Jinshi made a grim expression.

What is this? Could it be, that he can’t even buy such an expensive medicine? No, there’s no way, but, does he have a plan to deal with her in a more economical way?

“Jinshi-sama?”

When Maomao timidly called his name, Jinshi did a complete reversal from his elegant appearance from just then to a grim expression. Thinking he was going to put his fingers on his brows, he started to rest his chins on his hands, his manners poor.

“...I’m asking just in case, but what are you planning?”

“Even if you ask what I’m planning, I have resolved myself in my own way. I’m planning by considering how to die without leaving proof.”

Jinshi’s head slipped from his palms and hit the table with a thud. Maomao jerked back. Gaoshun approached Jinshi, but he raised his hand.

“I’m asking you once, but don’t tell me, for this past couple of days, you’ve just been thinking about such a thing?”

What this such a thing he was talking about, must be about Jinshi dealing with Maomao? For that, she could only give an affirmative.

“Yes. I am an eyesore, so it’s inevitable.”

Otherwise, it would be considering a method to seal her lips. In that case, taking a hostage would be paramount. It would be the older sisters of the brothel, no, her dad?

Her dad had been living severely with difficulty up until now. *He doesn’t need to bear any more hardship*, Maomao thought.

That’s why, she prepared the medicine like so.

If he rejected her using that medicine, then speaking of what would become of her-.

“Is it by expeditious hanging? Pressing some blunder on me.”

Just when she thought she heard the loud bang of the table moving, an impassive Jinshi was standing in front of Maomao.

Bent down, he glared at Maomao with damp eyes.

Maomao subconsciously drew back a step. But, like he was following her, Jinshi advanced a step.

“...Jinshi-sama, isn't it better to relax on the couch?”

“Who on earth is it who interacts without relaxing?”

A step. Another step. As Maomao stepped back, Jinshi stepped forward. Even when she sought Gaoshun's assistance, the man was being himself, hands together, saying nothing and looking up at the ceiling.

When Maomao realised it, she was forced all the way up against the wall. A hand was landed next to her head with a thud. His hands on the wall, Jinshi looked down at Maomao.

“...I thought I said, that I have something I must tell you. So why would there be a reason for dealing with you?”

Jinshi said, breathing in deeply.

(Did you say such a thing?)

Probably, her memories of that time must have flown out the window due to various mushrooms. She can't remember at all.

Yeah, it was the mushrooms' fault.

“In other words, is Jinshi-sama saying you're not planning to deal with me?”

Maomao looked up at Jinshi. He shook in surprise.

“That's the plan.”

“That's great.”

Maomao sighed in relief.

“...”

Jinshi looked at her with a very complicated expression.

“What is it? Jinshi-sama.”

“No, I’m sorry that you’re in the middle of being relieved, but I think this isn’t the place where you should be relieved.”

Jinshi was saying something she didn’t understand.

Hm, Maomao looked around her.

As Jinshi had driven Maomao to this point, he was peering down at her from above.

“Jinshi-sama, we cleared the misunderstanding so can you move aside?”

Maomao frankly stated. Jinshi was in the way as he won’t move from the wall. It was possible for her to slip through, but passing between the legs of a noble would be rude.

“...I knew it. You don’t understand at all. Do you understand how me, being, um, not a eunuch is supposed to mean?”

“That would be, it would have to be dreadful if it gets exposed here.”

The occasion of having men in the flower garden called the inner palace that was made only for the emperor cannot be. However, if she thought really hard about it, it doesn’t seem likely that the emperor would leave someone that stands out as much as Jinshi does alone. Wouldn’t it be considered abnormal to leave him as a man for some reason?

(No way!?)

The emperor must have the ulterior motive to have low ranked consorts give birth to Jinshi’s children. High ranked consorts aside, the children birthed by low ranked consorts have low inheritance rights. It’s troublesome if they were males, but what would happen if females were born?

The daughter of Jinshi who possesses a face that could topple one or two countries even as a man, she would surely become a trump card of diplomacy. The talks sound patient, but political marriages are decided while the girl hasn’t even turned ten yet. There might be a multitude of issues to it, but that might have profitability on its own.

(What a terrifying emperor, and a stud!)

Maomao faced Jinshi with an unspeakable gaze. It was half contempt and half pity.

“I understand that Jinshi-sama’s position is complicated. However, any more than this, the talk is a little too important for me. Can you pardon me for that? I won’t reveal it to others even if you split my mouth.”

That was all Maomao was able to say.

“I thought your intuition is good, but were you already aware of it?”

“Yes, I am confident now. I understand that you are in a difficult position, but this talk is beyond my standing.”

“...I get you. Let’s agree on that.”

Jinshi’s expression was gloomy. While trembling he thrust his empty hand into his breast pocket for some reason. As he was going to take something out, it seems something stopped him.

It seems there was some kind of complicated emotion within Jinshi.

“No, how do I say this, there is that too, but there’s also something else? How do I say this? More than my position, it’s about me personally.”

“Jinshi-sama personally?”

I possess a splendid thing that is like a stallion, was what he even should say? Speaking of that, this man had wanted to boast about his own body.

“No, I don’t mean looking.”

She unintentionally whispered it.

Jinshi’s face stiffened.

Crap, Maomao looked at Gaoshun. Gaoshun was starting to blossom divinity as though he reached enlightenment, but he reacted to the sound of the door knocking.

Jinshi finally moved away from Maomao, went to lie down on the couch as if nothing happened, and the Palace Official Chief who was waiting outside entered the room.

“What is it?”

Jinshi, plastering on a sparkling smile, said to the middle-aged court lady.

“Yes, His Majesty had said that he will be going to Consort Rouran’s place for sleeping today.”

“Is that so. I heard that he won’t come here tonight though.”

Jinshi tilted his head in a haughty manner.

When the emperor comes to the inner palace, it is reported beforehand. The room he comes to requires various preparations too. The consort must take a bath, puts on clothes imbued with incense, wears make-up and even the supper for meals have to be prepared.

It seems that there were some problems by just seeing the slightly flustered expression of the Palace Official Chief.

“Yes. I have been told that Consort Rouran is not in her palace.”

“...Hoh, isn’t she taking a walk?”

“About that...”

The Palace Chief Official looked like there was something difficult to say.

“It seems common that Consort Rouran often goes off somewhere...”

The Palace Chief Office minced her words unintelligibly.

It seems that she sees the court ladies who end up having to search for Consort Rouran every time she is informed when the emperor is coming. Normally, the Palace Official Chief wouldn’t interrupt, but since there was no time this time, she relied on Jinshi for what to do.

(Oh?)

If a high ranked consort goes out, she should have someone following her. And yet, is it possible to have no one knowing where she goes?

It's as if she goes out in a disguise.

(Disguise...)

Maomao suddenly reminded herself of Consort Rouran. The eccentric consort who wears unusual outfits every single time. She always wore gaudy make-up.

If she ended up being called a fashionista, that might be the end of it. However—.

Maomao found herself approaching Gaoshun and spoke to him.

“Gaoshun-sama, there's one thing I want to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Do you know about a court lady from Consort Rouran's place that is called Shisui?”

Gaoshun answered Maomao's question.

“I don't know all the court ladies of the palace either, but there should not be a court lady with that name.”

Gaoshun proclaimed.

“Why is that supposing?”

“Shisui, the name isn't that unusual, but it isn't a name that exists in Consort Rouran's place. The consort's father is ‘Shishou’. You should understand the meaning of that name.”

Maomao pressed down on her forehead.

How did she not notice that?

Among noble bloodlines, it is said that characters that stand for the family are added in their name. In Shishou's case, ‘Shi’. His children might also have the ‘Shi’ in their names. It is mostly customary for males of direct descent, but females having that isn't absent.

In that case, this means that there specifically shouldn't be a court lady with such a misleading name in the place of his actual child, Consort Rouran. That character isn't in Consort Rouran's name – it would truly become misleading to have another court lady with that.

Such that, there comes an issue.

"A court lady called Shisui, is it?"

The one who nervously interrupted was the Palace Official Chief. Seems she heard their voices.

"You know her?"

"It's a little ambiguous. Memories from a short while ago."

The Palace Official Chief rummaged through the bookshelf in the room, picked out an account book and started to open it. She flipped through it and stopped at a certain page.

"It's this. It's the court lady who was originally arranged to enter with Consort Rouran."

Everyone looked at the account book that the Palace Official Chief opened.

While wondering whether a mere court lady would be written in detail, when they saw the family structure, they understood.

"This person is Shishou-sama's daughter, Consort Rouran's half-older sister."

When Maomao gazed at the account book in a daze, her mood plummeted.

(I kinda recognise her.)

While thinking that—.

T/N: Title of the chapter is 'Shi (子)' as in the Shi Clan, and it can also mean 'child'.

CHAPTER 26

AFFINITY

Red and white white-powder flowers bloom en masse. There were also those among them that have black, round beads, dropped by the flowers.

Maomao went beyond that. It spread out into a field of long grass.

Ring, ring. She heard the bell-like sound of insects.

Maomao eased her way through the grass. There was the shadow of someone squatting in the centre of the field.

The girl, tall yet innocent, picked up the insects and put them inside the insect cage. She had put in one, two, three, when she finally noticed Maomao standing behind her.

“What is it? You want to gather them together?”

Shisui smiled in satisfaction as she showed her the insect cage.

Maomao shook her head and slowly dipped her head. Then she looked up, and as she was about to speak, Shisui shook her head and pressed her index finger to her lips.

“Can we stay like for a little longer? We’ve just become close.”

“..”

Shisui had garnered something Maomao’s attitude. A somewhat forlorn expression gave rise in her innocent smile.

“I guess that can’t do.”

She heard a voice call calling someone from a distance. The court ladies were searching for “Consort Rouran”.

Shisui stood before Maomao and held out the insect cage.

A bell sound ensued.

“This insect, you know. When the female lays eggs, she eats the male. Yet they make such a pretty sound.”

Lashes lowered, Shisui whispered into Maomao's ear.

"It's as if, it is just like here."

It wasn't the innocent voice of a young girl. It was a slightly hoarse woman's voice. And then—.

"Bad insects carry calamity. It's up to the doctor to stop it."

Shisui passed by Maomao. When Maomao turned back, the innocent young girl was nowhere to be seen.

The dignified woman was surrounded by several maids. A stunning gown was draped over her shoulders. Rouge was applied to the make-up-indifferent lips, a *huadian* was pasted on her forehead.

When she put on the coronet that had the feather of a curious foreign bird, the court lady Maomao recognised disappeared right there.

"Consort, let's return in haste."

"I know."

The woman's wooden voice left Maomao behind.

There was a clear wall.

A mere court lady and a high ranked consort, if they weren't master and servant, there is no tangent.

And, Maomao and the consort wearing the feathered coronet had no tangent.

As the long feather wavered in the wind, the consort and her entourage left.

Treating Maomao as if she wasn't there.

And then, only the bell sound resounded in the insect cage.



‘Bad insects carry calamity.’

What was the thing that Shisui said at the end supposed to mean?

Maomao groaned as she polished the silverware. Were her hands to stop while she was groaning, the head maid Honnyan could turn up out of nowhere and scold her so her hands cannot stop. Lately, her fists that seem to hollow out were rapidly improving and come quite often.

(Bad insects and calamity?)

Was this some sort of metaphor? Or was the meaning as it is?

Maomao could go either way for calamities and like. In this world, bad things happening could be due to anything.

However, speaking of doctors for calamities, that could also be said as a kind of disease.

(There are also diseases carried by insects.)

That meaning?

(Or she could be teasing me?)

It can be taken either way.

However, Maomao considered the young girl who is called Shisui. Regarding her, speaking of knowing nothing, she knew nothing. Speaking of knowing to a certain extent, she knew.

In other words, she had no idea.

While knowing nothing, night approached, and the emperor came. When she saw Consort Gyokuyou’s swelled abdomen, she made a complicated expression.

Recently, she heard that he is diligently visiting Consort Rifa.

Maomao slurped the congee that had aromatic vinegar added and glanced at the emperor.

He was looking at his daughter, Princess Rinrii with affection.

Once, the emperor asked Maomao when Consort Gyokuyou wasn't around. About whether there was a method to tell the sex of the children in the abdomen. *I don't know.* Maomao could only shake her head.

She recalled the emperor saying, "I see" as he lowered his gaze for a bit.

With the two high ranked consorts having a child in their abdomen at the same time, when it becomes like this, the gender distinction and order of birth was important. The first to be born will be Consort Gyokuyou's child, however, the gender is unknown. If the child is female, what could become of it?

Honestly stating her impressions, it seems the emperor wanted Consort Gyokuyou give birth to a boy. This doesn't necessarily mean that he is slighting Consort Rifa. Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Rifa, more than the difference in favour, it seems that Consort Gyokuyou is more convenient to the emperor one way or other on the political side of things.

With Princess Rinrii on his knee, playing with her by blowing the pinwheel, he appears to be a good father, but he is a court official. For the noble ones, blood relatives are allies and enemies at the same time. Historically, the relatives of consorts – even if she gave birth to a son – whose fathers become a hindrance, get erased, are very many.

At least, regarding Consort Gyokuyou and Consort Rifa's relatives, that concern is less, must be the emperor's consideration.

(What a cunning old man.)

And he also heads to other consorts' places.

Yesterday, he should have gone to Consort Rouran.

"..."

"What is it?"

The movement of the spoon scooping the congee had stopped. Honnyan asked with a slightly dubious expression.

“No. It’s nothing.”

Maomao placed the congee bowl down on the table and rinsed her mouth. And then she started on the next side dish.

Maomao worked as a food taster in the Jade Palace like this, but what about the Crystal Palace. She was concerned about whether the maids at Consort Rifa’s place have become decent.

Glancing at Consort Gyokuyou, Maomao closed her eyes.
This time, she thought of trying to ask even Gaoshun.



The next day, Gaoshun turned up alone; he had various previous arrangement with Honnyan. Jinshi seemed to be busy as he was working on something in the imperial court again.

According to Gaoshun, the court lady that was newly assigned to Consort Rifa was a middle-aged woman who has passed her forties plus another three young court ladies. It seems she was the person who had educated Consort Rifa and her former head maid in the past – he said that they didn’t overlook that point.

Maomao somehow imagined Honnyan and Suiren together split into two, and put her hands together for the Crystal Palace maids.

“Leaving that aside, Shaomao.”

Gaoshun said, the wrinkles of his brow creased more than usual.

Maomao had a somewhat unpleasant feeling and subconsciously knitted her brow as well.

“This is about Consort Rouran’s *older sister*.”

Maomao gave a start.

“Do you know this kind of girl?”

Gaoshun took a piece of paper out of his breast pocket and spread it out for Maomao to see. The portrait drawn with fine lines had a face she had seen from somewhere before. Slender, neat features. Her height was five *shaku* six *sun*¹.

“...oh hey.”

The woman looked like one of the court ladies who had charged at Maomao before. She was also tall.

She was pretty sure that she recalled that this imperial court lady in Shishou’s troupe that she caught sight of in the time of the blue rose.

“So this is the real Shisui.”

“Indeed, it seems she normally calls herself Suirei².”

As the child of a mistress, she must feel ashamed. To receive the single character in the name of an inferior, everyone around her might also be envious. If her half- younger sister became a high ranked consort, it must be all the more so.

(What a strange feeling.)

Shisui, no, Consort Rouran talked her about her older sister very joyfully.

Regarding that, Maomao can’t see the real Shisui smiling. She only made a bored and somehow weary expression.

Does Shisui talk enjoyably only if it’s to Consort Rouran? Or does Consort Rouran one-sidedly adore her? She had no idea.

“What is it about this person?”

Gaoshun glanced around at Maomao’s question. The room had no other maids; there was only one other attendant eunuch.

“Her mother was said to be a town girl. She seems to have already died...”

Gaoshun mumbled. It seems he hesitated to tell Maomao for some reason.

(Was it better that I didn’t ask?)

While thinking that, her curiosity that started to expand stared at Gaoshun and demanded a response.

“The one who raised Shisui, seemed to be a former medical officer.”

“A former medical officer?”

If so, she understood what Consort Rouran meant about her sister who knew a lot about medicine. Just like Maomao, she must have been trained in the knowledge of medicine.

If that’s the case, this raises a number of bad things.

“Indeed. The former seemed to be an outstanding medical officer who even studied abroad in a foreign country.”

To have studied abroad in a foreign country, that was amazing. It reminded Maomao of her dad, Ruomen. Her dad also studied in the West for several years.

Unpleasant sweat gradually rose for some reason, but Gaoshun continued.

“He incurred the empress’ wrath and was dismissed.”

“ ... ”

“And then the one dismissed—”

“Ah, enough.”

Maomao wanted to stuff her ears.

She was going to lose to her curiosity, but the scales tilted towards safety. *I shouldn’t hear any more than this*, Alarm bells rang inside Maomao.

“The reason he was dismissed was that he impregnated a court lady in the inner palace.”

“ ... ”

Gaoshun said it. He said it clearly.

She rapidly stepped into a place of no return.

“Why didn’t they think it was a eunuch?”

“...”

“In the past, only medical officers were exempted from castration.”

Gaoshun told her things she didn’t want to hear in succession.

“From that incident, there became no exceptions.”

Taking responsibility, it was said the officer was deprived of his official rank.
And it was said that from then on, all the medical officer who enters are to be castrated.

(Considering the empress, the measure was too lenient.)

As unpleasant sweat dripped, Maomao arrived at that question. Gaoshun immediately told her the answer.

“The pregnant court lady seemed to be a girl who had only just past ten years of age.”

It was a story that made her subconsciously want to spit. *In this world, are lolicons common? Do those bastards really prefer the young to that extent?* However, it was a troublesome thing even if the disease spread in the world that is full of unique tastes.

Maomao knew about one person who possessed the cannot be helped taste for little girls. Even now, the person remains in the gossip of the inner palace.

“The medical officer’s reduction of penalty was requested from the previous emperor.”

(About thaaat.)

“The child was taken in by the medical officer and the court lady remained in the inner palace.”

(Huh?)

Maomao recalled something she was stuck in.

Wasn't there a story that she heard before that sounded similar?

"The court lady, in those times, was a maid that followed a high ranked consort."

She knew what happened afterwards for that maid. She was shunned by the consort, unable to leave the inner palace, living by just enjoying ghost stories, and then, died.

"The former high ranked consort is currently bestowed to Shishou."

So, Consort Rouran is her daughter. And speaking of Shisui—.

(For argument's sake, if Shisui's mother is, if she was the child that was taken from the inner palace by the medical officer.)

The previous emperor only had two children.

This undermined that assumption.

"Shaomao should understand what that means with me telling you this much."

Maomao neither shook her head nor nod. She only stood in a daze.

Having disclosed the complicated family relation, Gaoshun made a look like he relieved some burden. As if to say, *you are also an accomplice*, with that.

Maomao reproachfully sent off Gaoshun who went back with a slightly cheerful demeanour.

CHAPTER 27

BELL CRICKET

Maomao sighed as she prepared supper. A newcomer maid who was nearby watched her. Maomao still wasn't that close to the newly entered maids. Since Maomao went out often and didn't talk to them herself, it can't be helped though.

Even the other maid, perhaps she was alone and felt out of place to mingle with a stranger, didn't try to talk that much.

(It's fine though.)

Leaving that aside, Maomao's head was full of other matters. Why did that worldly-wise attendant, again, talk to Maomao about such a bothersome thing?

(I don't plan on telling others though.)

Even so, wasn't it better to not reveal the information for a while longer?
Could there be some reason for it?

While thinking of such things, the supper was delivered from the kitchen. Maomao arranged the utensils that had been prepared for it.

Amid that, Maomao noticed a certain thing.

She picked up something that looked like a root with a pair of chopsticks.

At a glance, Maomao doubted the thing that looked like burdock root and placed it on a small dish.

"What are you doing?"

The new maid doubtfully looked at Maomao who was breaking apart something on the small dish. Maomao put the broken up pieces of the root into her mouth and then spat it out.

“...Can you call Honnyan-sama?”

That wasn't burdock root. That was ground cherry root.



“I also feel that it's after all this time.”

Maomao said as she looked at the contents of the dish.

“It certainly is after all this time.”

Honnyan said, her lashes lowered.

Ground cherry is also used as an abortion drug. In the early stages of pregnancy, it can cause miscarriages, but now, even if Consort Gyokuyou ate it, she didn't think there would be that much of an effect.

Consort Gyokuyou's pregnancy was spread in the inner palace was a tacit understanding of not being spread publicly. Consort Rifa's pregnancy was also spread to this extent.

If it goes well like this, Consort Gyokuyou should give birth in around a month. Even Consort Rifa should have a couple of months after this.

Even if they targeted either of them, she can't help feeling it strange that they added in poison after all this time. If they targeted them earlier aside.

However, to have actually mixed it in.

Maomao scratched her head like she was going to scratch it off, but Honnyan was right before her so she bore with it. Consort Gyokuyou wasn't around. She must be considering the pregnant consort, but it was that consort's matter. She must have got some inkling of it.

Honnyan stared at Maomao who was worrying endlessly.

“You have something you're concerned about?”

“ ... ”

No. It would be a lie if she said that.

“If I remember correctly, even the suppers are made in the kitchen together with the other consort’s.”

She enquired to make sure.

Honnyan affirmed it.

“As a way to soak in the flavour, aren’t other consort’s meals are mixed as well?”

“You got that situation from eating it huh.”

Honnyan said, appearing shocked.

Isn’t it that you don’t understand if you don’t’ eat it, Maomao thought. At any rate, it was good that there was more incentive if she ate it.

(I wonder what it could be.)

Maomao pondered.

There was something she was strangely stuck on.

What was it, the first thing she was stuck on?

She felt something connected somewhere.

(Just what happened with that?)

Speaking of abortion drugs, there was that incident.

The caravans came and sold a multitude of abortion drug ingredients there.

That was what Consort Rifa’s head maid purchased and tried to make abortion medicine. She made it for Consort Rifa.

The reason she, who was distant from the knowledge of medicine, tried to make it was because she found a scrap of paper that had the ingredients written on it by chance. Also, she didn’t know the original owner of the scrap of paper.

Was the former head maid covering up for another person?

(No.)

How could that be? Would that haughty person ever go that far? Otherwise, was she harassed by the government officials who did her hearing?

(There's even the possibility of relatives.)

In that case, it wouldn't be consistent if the other person was Consort Rifa. Honestly, that head maid would think it was difficult to acquire the emperor's favour. If so, wouldn't Consort Rifa who had the same relation take precedence?

(What if she really had picked it up?)

It would become that there is such an insolent fellow in the inner palace.

Otherwise, the story of the scrap of paper might be a lie from the start. However, Maomao didn't think it was like that.

(They specifically wrote all the ingredients that were hard to gather.)

There were methods to make abortion medicines that were closer.
Whether white-powder flower or ground cherry.

(!?)

Where was the place she saw white-powder flowers recently?
And who was the other person who was there?

Did she have some objective?

"Maomao, what is it?"

From Honnyan calling out to her, she grasped her unsettled thought.

"No, it's nothing."

She still hasn't reached a conclusion. It wasn't good to speak about conjectures.

But, if Maomao didn't move here, a more wretched thing might occur.

(Bad insects carry calamity.)

She didn't understand what kind of meaning that had.
However, it wasn't that she understood even if she stood at a standstill here.

Maomao stared at Honnyan.

"Honnyan-sama."

"What is it?"

Seeing Maomao's expression, Honnyan returned a dubious face.
Maomao made a momentary grim face and said what she needed to say.

"I have a request. Is it alright if I return to being Jinshi-sama's maid?"

"!?"

Honnyan slapped the table. With a clatter, the dish on it momentarily hovered in the air.

"What are you talking about all of a sudden!"

At the expected response, Maomao gave a small sigh.

"Don't you know that from here on is a critical period of Gyokuyou-sama!"

Her expectation had a leeway of about another month. However, this was an estimation, there might be the chance of a premature birth.

If the consort gave birth in the inner palace, it was undependable with just the quack doctor. She wouldn't be relieved unless there was a more experienced and capable medical officer around.

However, Maomao replied to Honnyan, expressionlessly.

"I am a doctor. I have witnessed childbirth before, but I have not taken it up. Rather, more than me who has half-baked knowledge, would it be better to prepare someone

who has greater expertise in it?”

In saying that, Maomao wrote characters on the table with her finger.

“In the prostitution quarter, there is a former medical officer and eunuch. If it is him, he has plenty of experience in child delivery.”

“ ... ”

“He was once banished from the inner palace, but he should be more dependable than the current medical officer.”

Sorry, quack doctor, Maomao said as she apologised in her head.

“Even if we don’t directly tell the emperor, Jinshi-sama can try let it pass.”

“...to have been banished from the inner palace, doesn’t that make him a criminal?”

Honnyan looked at Maomao with cold eyes.

She understood. *Everyone* must have that kind of reaction.

Since that was common knowledge.

“He is a criminal, but his skill is certain. Besides, if you’re particular about this, I won’t be able to be here either.”

Maomao raised the corner of her lips.

“I was brought up by this criminal.”

It’s bargaining, she thought.

Supposing, if she was prejudiced against her dad the criminal, Maomao was his daughter. It would become that the daughter of a criminal won’t be able to become a food taster of a consort.

Even before, Honnyan had something up, Maomao recalled. That time, she felt that she was done in well by the other, but this time it wasn’t the case.

Honnyan’s mouth was pressed into a \smile shape

Honnyan was a capable head maid. On her scales, is what side would be beneficial or what for the consort, her master.

“...What about food tasting? Right now there is that ingredient mixed in here, right?”

“This isn’t targeting Consort Gyokuyou.”

“...Then, Consort Rifa?”

Maomao shook her head.

If it is like this, she would go by the process of elimination. Excluding Consort Riishu who still wasn’t chosen, there was only one other high ranked consort.

(What a thing.)

Maomao remembered the insect cage that she put in her room. Inside it was insects that made bell-like sounds with their wings.

She recalled that ghost story. What kind of story did the girl who had still assumed the name Shisui tell? It was the story where bell crickets appeared. It ate something else instead of the monk. Just what did the *ayakashi* eat?

Among insects, there were those who also ate the males after reproducing. Maomao, who saw praying mantis eating each other, first thought it was gross.

However, it was also the same here.

If she gives birth to a child of an influential person, at times, the woman would become adverse to her father.

So she could provide power to her child, at times, she could erase her father.

Same as insects.

(Bad insects come carrying calamity,)

The words that were repeated many times were repeated once again.

Is it something like this? Maomao sighed.

The girl who loved insects had no interest in power. She probably wanted to just carefreely pretend to be a maidservant.

While making sure that a child does not settle in her abdomen.

They didn't really socialise for long. It was no more than them just having silly talk once in a while.

Maomao didn't really mean to stick her head into this, but even so, she couldn't just not do anything.

"For Consort Gyokuyou's healthy child. I will be food tasting outside as well."

Maomao searched for a solution that only she could do.

"...I get it."

"Thank you very much."

When she relayed her small thanks to Honnyan who only said that short phrase, Maomao picked up the contents of the dish before her eyes and put it into her mouth.

Right away, she was struck by Honnyan. It goes without saying that she was forced to spit it out.

CHAPTER 28

DINNER

Two days after she brought up the aforementioned matter to Honnyan, an old man with a figure like an old woman showed up at the Inner Palace.

She was surprised that his movements that were quicker than she had expected.

Her dad, who was led in by Gaoshun, greeted every person in the Jade Palace and then headed off to the medical office. It seems that he will be at the quack doctor's place for a short while.

She had wondered what would happen if the quack got dismissed, but for the time being, that worry was unfounded.

Infa and the others showed up before Maomao who was organising the baggage.

"Really restless too, aren't you?"

So saying that, they came to help her clean the room. Guien was amazed at the medicinal herbs that kept coming out no matter how much she packed them, and Airan almost shrieked at the dried lizard tail.

"Since it's work."

She said it was work, but was it really the case? Maomao couldn't help thinking. If she did the work properly, Jinshi would surely award her with an unusual medicinal herb as a reward, or perhaps, a foreign medical book. But Maomao wavered at the something that was different to that.

(...Ah, what a pain.)

She didn't want to do such a thing, but she'll end up hating herself if that was what she did.

As she sighed while cramming the compounding tools into the wrapping cloth, Infa looked at Maomao as if she recalled something.

"That reminds me, Maomao's father? He is, right? That person?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

She decided to go with that since they look similar. It's a pain to explain it in detail so she gave the abridged version.

“He's kinda, completely different to what I imagined. How do I say this, he's normal? Something like that?”

“...what were you imagining?”

“Well, speaking of what, you know.”

Like they were agreeing with Infa's words, Guien and Airan also faced each other and nodded.

It was nothing short of a mystery on just what they were imagining.



After leaving the inner palace and walking in the imperial court after a long time, she felt that the atmosphere was somewhat different. The inner palace was restrictive. She hardly felt the outside air. It only amounted to the occasional wind that leaked in through the gaps in the walls.

Maybe it was the strained atmosphere, or maybe it was that if you suspect something, everything will look suspicious, she had no idea. Just that within the few months, something must have changed.

“...the atmosphere is somewhat different.”

Maomao said to Gaoshun in a roundabout way. Gaoshun had come to pick up Maomao. Her luggage left to the manservant who was waiting outside, Maomao headed for Jinshi's room.

“There will soon be a conference with a foreign country.”

After he said it frankly, Gaoshun walked briskly. The man who would normally slow down, taking Maomao's pace into consideration, was walking unusually fast.

Maomao hurried after Gaoshun.

Maomao didn't understand government affairs. Even if she was there listening, she would only understand half of it.

After reaching Jinshi's building, Maomao decided to talk to Gaoshun after properly timing the moment the owner of this place wasn't around.

Maomao understood that it would become bothersome if Jinshi knew what she was attempting to do from here on.



A couple of days after the preparations, Maomao waited upon Jinshi together with Suiren. Staring fixedly, the beautiful master seemed like he's worn out for a different reason to before.

Jinshi *usually* exuded a disgusting smile. Often before Maomao, he displayed a look of sullenness, but before others, especially in the inner palace, he hardly showed that expression. His outward appearance was good if you were to say it, but it looked like he was wearing a mask.

During the time he's wearing a mask, everyone must be effortlessly fooled by that inhuman beauty. With the reason being that he possessed an unusual beautiful face, the numbers of those who noticed that crack was limited.

And the few places where he doesn't hide the cracks and display it, would have to be just his own room here.

As soon as he entered the living room after coming back from work, Jinshi slumped down on the couch, completely exhausted. As Suiren has said it, Maomao passed the honeyed fruit juice to Jinshi.

Jinshi sculled down half of that, then scanned the document that Gaoshun had brought over.

Maomao glanced at it. It appeared to be a document on a conference with a foreign country this time. If it's the significance of customs, even Maomao knew about it at least.

While thinking that it was not good to steal looks, Maomao's eyes shifted to the place

she was concerned about.

“..”

“What is there?”

Perhaps he noticed Maomao staring, Jinshi asked her.

“The location of the conference, isn’t in the capital, right?”

She saw the place name – it was the name of a town that was situated along the national border in the northwest. Considering the distance from the capital, it would have to be a long trip. She didn’t know who was attending, but they may not return in several months.

“Seems that the other country doesn’t wish to come all the way here either.”

Rather, considering how they had proceeded all the way here, it would be more of a compromise.

However, what Maomao was concerned about, was the location of the town that was holding the meeting.

The western side was the national border with the foreign country. The northern side was pretty much a self-governing territory, but a different ethnic group lived there since olden times. Although it wasn’t taken as a country, it was the nature of the locality where both sides – west and north – were vigilant.

“Honestly, it’s not a place that you can be excited about.”

“I guess so. I’m not at ease.”

Even the different ethnic group were people, but things like the culture that were passed on there were different. When her dad studied abroad in the West, he said he also had that feeling.

The language was different, and mutual understanding was also difficult. It becomes even more difficult when you bring in various components like food, clothes, lifestyle, and religious belief.

“There’s also that, but they have a custom where they eat strange things.”

With a strangely weary expression, he drank up the rest of the fruit juice.

“It seems insects are normally served in meals.”

Jinshi sighed deeply.

It's because of that you're naïve, Maomao thought. Maomao, who had eaten both snakes and frogs, hadn't not eaten insects before. In particular, the northern parts treat insects as an important source of nutrients.

Even if it was not normally eaten in the years where there were locust plague, they would have to eat even crickets too so it cannot be helped. The northwestern parts were spread out as a grain-producing region, so if locust plague occurred, it cannot be overlooked.

(Locust plague?)

A calamity caused by insects. In bad years there were also those who die from starvation. As this could go as far as to also change the ruler of the country sometimes, it was one of the serious disasters. It was also said the insect was written with the emperor for that reason¹.

Maomao recalled one other thing.

(Bad insects carry calamity.)

The final words the young girl had said when she was still Shisui.

What does insect mean? What is the calamity?

Maomao had only considered diseases. However, if what she said was about this:

(There will be locust plague from here on?)

No, no matter how much she knew about insects, was that something she knew? Otherwise, if she knew, how much of a benefit would that be?

That can't be, Maomao shook her head and considering something else.

(If we speak about insects,)

There was a technique that forces insects to eat each other and uses the survivors as a curse. It's called witchcraft², but Maomao didn't believe in things like curses. It is likely that due to poisonous creatures eating each other that will accumulate poison. Creating a stronger poison and serving that up to the other person. The curse was something like this.

(I want to try it once.)

While thinking about such insolent things, she looked at the map that was attached to the document. Suddenly, she recalled the words of the peddler who was a guest of the pleasure district a long time ago.

Was it the story of the different ethnic tribe that lived in the northern parts?

“ ... ”

“What is it?”

Jinshi asked Maomao who was staring intently at the map.

“No, the tribe that lives in this place, do they hunt?”

The plains of the northern sides that spread out to fields and pastures extended out to the forest.

“The citizens of this country do not. Though, I have heard that the foreign tribe hunt mainly for provisions.”

“...I have heard that there are many tribes that worship insects.”

“I am not sure about that. Though, I have heard about coating insect poison on arrows and using that in hunts and battles.”

Using poison in hunting can be found anywhere. However, the arrow poison that was generally used here was wolfsbane. The south also harvested poison from frogs.

The part where they specifically use insects was the key point.

(What if the insects that carry calamity meant this?)

If they intervene with that hereafter while in discussions with the foreign country, the country may fall into an unfavourable situation, if not ruin.

Therefore this was a discussion that affected the face of the country.

If it's like that, if imprudent, they cannot get away with the small skirmish that they had up until now and a conflict will break out. And then, from that war, the ones who would look more important would be—.

The majority of the woodlands that spread out in the northern parts was shouldered by Consort Rouran's clan, that is, the Shi Clan. The emperor would have no choice but to rely on their strength.

No, then that doesn't make sense.

How did Consort Rouran know about it beforehand? If the Shi Clan knew about it and left it alone, for what reason? Even if that was to demand gratitude from the emperor, wouldn't that be indirect and a bother?

No, that was wrong.

That wasn't their goal.

After all this time, would they have a reason to demand gratitude from the emperor? More than that, they wouldn't think of trying to reach for something bigger?

Even if Maomao reached as far as that idea, she wanted to shake her head.

Absurd. As far as that idea goes, were the officials of this society fools? They have plenty of wealth and renown. The ones would think about climbing higher were those who go beyond living fast and plunge towards their own deaths.

But, the other party was the clan, the high official who came along while thinking of the previous era. Somehow or other, that idea that was beyond her means may also exist.

(Ah, so troublesome.)

What to do if they did that? On top of the pointless bloodshed, they will only just meet with familial extermination. Or because there was the cause of victory that they

plotted for it?

Was it for *this reason* that Consort Rouran wanted to tell Maomao?

In order to stop her foolish relatives.

Unless—.

“When is this?”

Maomao inadvertently spoke. *This* would be the conference with the foreign country.

“It’s a short time after the new year. The turn of the year should be busy.”

There was no time.

Maomao slightly knitted her eyebrows and looked at Gaoshun who was also knitting his eyebrows similarly.

Gaoshun, as if he timed it, passed a new document to Jinshi.

“Jinshi-sama, what should we do about this?”

He had passed over yet another event program. Jinshi blatantly grimaced.

Maomao also peered at it, and end up making an unpleasant expression at the contents. It appeared to be a religious festival that was performed periodically, but the issue was the banquet that was held after that. Seeing that face, she wanted to droop her shoulders.

It was a gathering of elites. Although the emperor wasn’t attending, the one who was holding the religious festival seemed to be the Imperial Brother. There were several names that even Maomao knew.

Consort Rouran’s father, Shishou, and the monocle man made her tired by just recalling him for some reason, Rakan.

By just seeing that, the other fellows who were attending must also be elite faces.

Maomao subconsciously nearly stiffened her face, but she noticed that Gaoshun was staring at her.

(This is...)

It was a chance that she won't get again.

Maomao stood before Jinshi and stared at his face.

"Jinshi-sama."

"What?"

Maomao gave a small sigh.

Gaoshun must have shown Jinshi's schedule before Maomao for this reason. As though he was saying that this was a chance she won't get again.

Thus, Maomao must not miss this. She didn't know when the next chance will come around.

"May I take up the food taster post for this banquet?"

She had intended to say it very naturally.

However, Jinshi faced Maomao with eyes of scepticism.

"How suspicious."

"What is?"

So to let her expression show outwardly, Maomao looked at Jinshi with a stiffly cooled gaze. This gaze could only look like the eyes where she was gazing at a hairy caterpillar. The gaze of Suiren who had noticed it was considerably terrifying, but she could not pay heed to it now.

"You, won't attend the gathering where the tactician is around by choice."

"..."

Mhm, it was exactly that.

He should have just disregarded that sort of thing.

“Jinshi-sama, the dinner that Suiren-sama prepared is getting cold.”

“Your personality is one where you won’t lie but you won’t speak the truth, right?”

“...”

Maomao glanced at Gaoshun.

Gaoshun made a slightly troubled expression again, but he was one step ahead.

“Jinshi-sama, Shaomao being Shaomao seem to be thinking about Jinshi-sama.”

“...what?”

As Jinshi made a slightly dubious expression, he looked intermittently between Maomao and Gaoshun.

“For more or less, even if it is a person she can’t deal with, she had said it thinking of Jinshi-sama’s sake.”

(It’s wrong though.)

It might be that concerning the result, but it wasn’t for his sake. But it’s a bother so she’ll stop talking back each time for it.

“Even if she didn’t say to win over Rakan-sama, isn’t she thinking about wanting to become the enemy of an enemy?”

The things Gaoshun said, wasn’t substantially wrong. She won’t need to correct him.

In saying so, a somewhat hot gaze was directed towards Maomao.

“Is that true?”

Jinshi was, more than usual, looking at Maomao with a face that had increased sensuality. His eyes were slightly wet, the entirety of his face looked feverish.

Maomao neither shook her head nor did she nod. She only cast her eyes down.

Though Jinshi stood up from the couch with a clank, a steamy scrumptious aroma

came closer.

Though Jinshi charged towards Maomao's face, Sui ren held out the congee with a smile.

"The meal is getting cold, so please eat."

The words of the middle-aged maid were, as usual, incontestable.

CHAPTER 29

BRING TO LIGHT

Maomao understood that although it has the word ‘festival’¹ in it, it wasn’t something interesting. It also depended on the type of thing being worshipped, but in this case, it was mentioned to be a ritual² that was prohibited to women. It was a common custom when it came to worshipping female sages and goddesses.

“Please change into this outfit.”

The outfit that she got from Gaoshun was something worn by pages. He must be wanting to have her to wear adult clothes in truth, but those won’t fit with Maomao’s size. In the case of food tasting, based on the amount and type of poison, same gendered food tasters were often used so it couldn’t be helped. This time, with it being a ritual prohibited to women, there was also the forethought where this outfit should be more preferred in this banquet as well.

Maomao, was arranged to be the food taster for the imperial brother.

Gaoshun must have explained it away skilfully. *It really is convenient*, Maomao thought.

With Maomao’s physique, which was flat from the start, she didn’t really have to trouble herself with binding her chest with bandages. Plus with her hair was tied up in a bun on the crown of her head, when she wore a hood, she didn’t look out of place. She looked into the mirror and found herself so fitting to the point that she spontaneously broke out in a dry smile.

When Jinshi came in and saw her, he became wordless at how much it suited her to the tee.

(Yeah, absolutely.)

She didn’t want to be lumped together with Jinshi who stood out no matter what he wore.

Speaking of Jinshi, it seems he will be present in the ritual – he told Maomao to wait

in the antechamber. Rituals are performed in one of the several rituals grounds in the imperial court. The location of the rituals, which are regularly performed, are decided, for the most part, by matching the seasonal directions. It can also be decided by divination, but Maomao had no idea what the criterion was, so she didn't care.

During the period she waited in the antechamber, she truly had nothing to do. As a bit of purification before the festival, there was no food and drink, and even if there were, Maomao wasn't permitted to eat before the food tasting.

There was nothing she could do in particular. She could only ruminate deeply on what will happen from here on.



When it was the time the ritual ended, it was Gaoshun's son, Basen, who came to pick up Maomao. With his usual uncourteous expression, he jerked his head, gesturing at her to come along.

Maomao moved, abiding to that.

The location of the banquet was near the ritual grounds. Different to the Garden Party, she was grateful that it wasn't held in open air. In the long and narrow hall that was about one *in* ³ in length, there were two rows of long tables lined up. As a rite that thanked the final blessings before the passing of Winter, the cuisines must be certainly extravagant.

She could see a seat with a hanging curtain in the innermost spot. That must be where the imperial brother will be sitting.

(I heard the younger brother is eccentric.)

You should show your face during the banquet at least, that was Maomao's true intention. Well, that's the end of the matter if he was said to fear strangers. He should make a good try going out to the banquet at least.

He is the imperial brother rumoured to have sustained misfortunate treatment, but Maomao didn't get that feeling. She hadn't even seen the person in question properly, but as far as Maomao knowing the emperor she had seen, she couldn't see him treating his brother like that. No, she considered that this brother would be protected

excessively, rather.

(...)

Suddenly, she recalled about what happened last year, about Former Consort Ah Duo.

She couldn't forget the face the woman displayed when she left the inner palace. The face of a prideful empress dowager.

(Let's stop turning over weird speculations.)

Maomao was ashamed about her suspicion of the popular saying from before. It didn't matter whether that was true or not. The things that are known now are fact, was something said in society.

She slowly made her way to the front seat with her head bowed. "Be good here," Basen whispered into her ears, then went on standby next to the front-most seat.

Like so, Basen was on standby on the opposite side, like he was standing between the imperial brother's seat.

(Huh?)

As officials came in and sat down one after another, Jinshi didn't show up.

Oh dear, she thought when the raccoon-like man, Shishou, sat right next to Maomao. He glanced at Maomao, but he didn't look like he paid heed to her. Seems Maomao in male clothes didn't stand out at all.

The seats were rapidly being filled. Only the seat diagonal to the front of Maomao was empty. The one who slowly came over and sat there, was a middle-aged man who wore monocles.

When the middle-aged man looked around shakily, his sharp eyes found Maomao. His slender eyes widened in its own way, and he grinned.

He rocked his body in glee, looking like he couldn't calm down. Shishou who was sitting right in front of him watched with a dubious gaze. That man's suspicious behaviour wasn't something that started now, but just from seeing the surroundings, he really was a person of concern.

Needless to say, Maomao ignored him.

(Don't come, don't come over.)

As if her wish was granted, there was sudden sound from the inside. Seeing Basen slowly lowering his head, the imperial brother must have shown up inside the curtain. Everyone followed suit, getting up from their seats and bowed. Regarding the crown prince, sitting and waiting would seem rude as well, but wouldn't this be an affable banquet comparative to face, Maomao thought.

There was likely a door at the back. He could enter from there without anyone seeing him.

Maomao thought she was more on the side of disliking people as well, but as far as she could tell, his seemed considerably severe.

(If it's like this, the emperor should also endeavour in making children too.)

To think that this is the crown prince, the future is too uneasy. As far as Maomao knew, the imperial brother has yet to have a person to call a consort. Even though he was already at the age where it wouldn't be strange for him to endeavour in making children.

However, in a certain meaning, with that much of an introverted personality, quite unlike the current emperor, this younger brother would have to be a person where you wouldn't think to go outside. What that meant was, it might be good that there wasn't bloodshed.

A while later, the noon bell rang. Together with that, Basen stood up and looked inside the curtain.

Everyone worked hard, Basen relayed the haughty words that sounded like that. *Enjoy the banquet*, accompanying those words, music from the corner of the room could be heard.

Between the tables that were placed left and right, actors appeared and began the play. There was a beautiful woman among them, but from the broadness of their shoulders, it had to be an oyama⁴.

As everyone watched the play, the pages came in bringing the aperitif. The cup was

first passed to Basen, who passed it over to the imperial brother on the other side of the curtain. After everyone was passed the wine, she received a small sake cup from Basen.

When she sniffed the wine, there was the aroma of alcohol and fruit. It was a mixture of shaojiu⁵ and fruit juice.

She had heard from Gaoshun beforehand the variety of dishes that will be served in the banquet.

Gaoshun was sitting a fair distance away.

Jinshi wasn't around.

(...)

Maomao twisted her brows, but she could only do the job she was doing now. Bringing the cup to her lips, she drank some to taste. A light, non-peculiar taste spread in her mouth.

(It's extremely delicious.)

Maomao drank it down, savouring the taste, and slowly closed her eyes.

She tasted the food more slowly than usual.

When the cup was emptied, she passed it back to the page and rinsed her mouth.

Perhaps having confirmed that, the person behind the curtain made a sound of rustling clothes. After affirming the sound of swallowing, Basen raised his hand slightly.

Perhaps seeing that, the officials around them picked up the wine all at once.

Only Rakan pretended to drink, and quickly placed it on the table, but it wasn't something she cared about.

The appetiser was brought over, and Maomao tasted the food once again. She chewed more than usual, performing it slowly.

(Yeah, delicious.)

It was a regretful taste that she could only have a few bites. While thinking, *the leftovers are fine so would I be able to eat it later*, she raised her lips, *that might be impossible*.

The soup came next. The moment she scooped it with the soup spoon⁶, her whole body had an uncomfortable feeling.

(...)

She was driven by the need to scratch her entire body. If no one was watching, she would be digging her nails in with all her might. There was the sound of the spoon hitting the bowl.

Her breathing also got rough. It was hard to breathe; she was somewhat dizzy.

She couldn't hold it in. She pushed the bowl into the hands of the page who was close by.

She looked at her hands; red rashes had erupted. Since the page was looking at Maomao with a strange expression, she touched her face and felt bumps. The rashes must have broken out over her face too.

(Aah, oh boy.)

Maomao's vision spun.

When she thought that she could see the ceiling lurching, she lost conscious.



Even though the food taster page had collapsed, the ones who first reacted were two people.

The first was the person behind the curtain. Gaoshun could see their big movements even from his seat. Basen who was there immediately pushed his way through and held down the person inside.

The other person who reacted was the monocle personnel.

On the face of that man who usually smiled frivolously, his composure was gone.

Slender eyes wide, he tried to approach the food taster page.

Because Basen had to hold that person down as well, Gaoshun couldn't help but think that he made him do a disadvantageous duty.

A medical officer was summoned right away, and the page whose face was inflamed red retired from the banquet site.

Gaoshun could only watch. There was nothing he could do with his position.

It was that moment there was the sound of glass shattering.

The man who was being held down by several officials – Basen and others – Rakan had crushed the glass cup that was on the table. Crimson liquid dripped from his left hand.

“Captain!”

There was no other person in this place who had that official rank besides Rakan, but it didn't seem it reached his ears.

Raken extended his bloody left hand, and those eyes that had a touch of madness faced the person on the other end.

At the end of his finger, was Shishou.

“What are you planning?”

Rakan said only that, and then went on to point at different officials one after another.

Gaoshun memorised the people Rakan pointed at. The people who were pointed at darted their eyes about. And then, they looked around like they were exchanging looks.

Amid the restlessness, only Shishou looked back at Rakan nonchalantly.

It's troublesome to be allies with the man called Rakan. However, you must never have

him as an enemy.

That man was mad, but the rest of him was supplemented by talent.

The Ra Clan. This man who was born from the family that turned out madmen and geniuses, was said to be the exact embodiment of it. He possessed eyes that were odd for a human; he got it by just looking with his talent. Because of that, he turned out a great number of outstanding officials.

As though that man succeeded in getting the genuineness of art.

At the same time, you can also say it like this.

That he could correctly guess the genuineness of people.

For the people who were doing suspicious things, he could also be said to be a pain in the neck. In the past, it seems that there were those who neglected that and tried to make Rakan disappear, but seeing how he has survived, he must have been suspicious and thwarted them before that.

Above all, as his adopted son managed the finance of the country, he was even nastier.

Unfortunately, considering Rakan's personality, if no one makes the first move, he won't make a move. He only had interest in board games and gossip, and a small number of people.

Army work, even battles as an example, was no more than a game for this man.

And if someone puts the jewel that man treasures into danger...

It goes without saying.

As blood continued to flow, Rakan smiled.

He smiled like a beast, fangs bared.

All the people who were at the location, were frozen, watching Rakan's smile.

Only Shishou looked back at Rakan in silence.

Was it because he was surprised by Rakan's actions? No one at the location was aware

of it.

Gaoshun and Basen noticing that the person behind the curtain was already gone, was something a little while later.

CHAPTER 30

DOZE

Maomao could hear the clattering sounds of rocking. When she slowly opened her eyes, she saw silken locks of black silk.

While her vision was blurry, she touched her mouth. Something sticky around her lips. There was a bitter taste in her mouth, but her nose had a sour taste.

(I must have vomited.)

No doubt she was made to drink an emetic or water to vomit out the poison first things first. It seems she was treated properly. Her throat wasn't blocked, and she wasn't suffocating.

She was blanketed by furs. She had pushed it aside. Her whole body was still itchy. It was also hard to breathe.

She also felt like wanting to slump down on her side, but there was a reason she couldn't do that.

The locks of black silk were hanging right over Maomao's face. When she followed its origin, a beautiful face to the point of disagreeableness was staring at Maomao fixedly, lashes lowered.

"You awake?"

Jinshi's pale expression lifted with a smidge of relief.

(Jinshi-sama...)

No sound came out when she tried to speak. She could only open and close her mouth repeatedly like a fish.

Even though her body was rocking with the clatter, her head didn't hurt. She felt something kind of hard on the back of her head.

Considering the position of Jinshi's face and his posture, as well as the place where Maomao was lying down, it seems that she was now in an immensely uncomfortable position.

Should she call it a lap pillow?

Originally, it wasn't something a noble should give.

She tried to move her heavy body, but she couldn't move while she was numb. Jinshi held down Maomao's squirming body.

"Be obedient. I'm taking you the person you call your adoptive father's place."

The clattering was because they were in a horse carriage. The place where the banquet was held was in the imperial court, near the ritual grounds but was considerably closer to the edge of it. If they were to head to the inner palace from there, if they don't even use the horse carriage, it will be difficult to carry one collapsed person. It should be more than two *ri* (~1 km or ~0.6 mi.) in a straight line.

Though she tried to look out the window, Jinshi was in the way so she couldn't. Jinshi, being Jinshi, was staring at Maomao.

"Did poison get served?"

Jinshi asked.

Maomao could only shake her head slowly.

"Gaoshun must have told you, about what was going to happen."

He said to verify. Maomao could only nod.

It was as Jinshi said.

This wasn't to serve poison to the imperial brother. It was something that Maomao had devised with Gaoshun beforehand.

The rashes that broke out on her entire body wasn't poison. It was a reaction that occurs when she eats a certain food.

“It didn’t seem like there was anything that was like poison.”

It shouldn’t be poison for Jinshi. After all, Maomao was more resilient against poison than people. This Maomao had a weakness too.

It was just buckwheat, that she cannot eat.

If there was buckwheat in the food, Jinshi would also notice it. He should know that Maomao cannot eat that.

Things like what the food taster cannot eat at least are investigated before the food tasting. Buckwheat wasn’t eaten much in the capital, and it wasn’t something that the emperor or Consort Gyokuyou liked to that extent, so it was something that hardly came out in meals.

Nonetheless, there was one time where helou¹ was served, but she explained it to Honnyan on that occasion and another person was substituted to food taste for her.

And so, Jinshi must think that buckwheat wasn’t used in the cooking.

Maomao also anticipated that. That’s why she took upon herself to have the shaojiu diluted with fruit juice as the aperitif.

Distilled liquor used grains as the ingredient. There were those among them that used buckwheat.

Although it became alcohol, it was very often that the buckwheat base got mixed into it during the process. And this time, there were more than expected in it.

(That was bad.)

Since it was not good if the effect was slow, she had drunk it all down. She regretted that she should have just gone through with it with a sip.

There was also the other way of mixing a different poison and acting. However, someone would then have to become the villain. If that was exposed, it would be herself, if that wasn’t exposed, someone would be made out to be the criminal. They cannot get away with plotting to poison the Imperial Brother.

If it was the wine used as the aperitif, she heard that they wouldn’t specifically go as far as to look into the ingredients. They won’t consider that deeply on the food taster’s constitution. A strange reaction towards a specific food wasn’t that diffused in this

society.

Even if they followed up on the incident where Maomao had collapsed this time, Gaoshun, who knew the circumstances, would skilfully explain it away for her. Maomao wished that this incident, even if it becomes an issue from now on, wouldn't grow to the point of a question of who was responsible.

Speaking of disadvantage, it might be that weirdo tactician who might have stirred some commotion, but that person shouldn't mind it.

Maomao just needed to collapse before that man, that nasty b*stard with the monocle. Before that b*stard who controls the imperial court as the man who doesn't want to be surrounded by enemies.

Surely, when that man sees Maomao who collapsed in that place, the idea that will come to his head foremost will no doubt be the imperial brother's assassination. And then, he would evaluate the plotting men would no doubt be creating a diversion.

Oddly, though Maomao hated him that much, she had the strange self-confidence that weirdo tactician will finish up anything for her sake.

What that meant was, Maomao thought that she was a sly creature herself.

If it's that man who possessed the eyes and sensitivity different to normal people, from now on, he will catch the officials who are plotting something good-for-nothing, and besides, he will evaluate the ones who must be spectating that. Surely, even if the country was going to fall like it was going to topple, that man would have to be indifferent to it. At best, he will think about a world that became difficult to play Shogi.

He was just the right person to use to bring it to light.

And, the sole people who could use him would be about Maomao, and at best, her dad, Ruomen.

Fabrication isn't effective for that man. Supposedly, if Jinshi knew about this, there was the possibility where he would sense that.

That's why, she took it upon herself to cover it up from Jinshi and do it.

(Besides, he might object.)

Jinshi strangely charged at Maomao with such a behaviour. If he has a noble social standing, he should treat the likes of a mere maidservant more rudely. This way feels

easier for herself as well.

(Even though it feels easier.)

She could see something giving off a dull gleam in Jinshi's jet black hair. It was an exquisitely crafted silver kanzashi. Even though the lustre was removed, she understood by seeing that it had a high-class feeling from the exquisite craftsmanship. It seems there was some animal carved on it.

(Horse? Deer?²)

Even though the flaming mane was a carving, it was lively. That adorned Jinshi's hair.

Maomao understood something from that animal.
And then, she gazed at it intently with vacant eyes.

The animal that looked like a horse and a deer. Maomao won't go as far as to joke around by calling it a fool.

The fictional creature. Those who can wear this design on their body are limited.

She slowly extended her hands. Her hands that had erupted with red rashes was ugly. She should not show it to the nobleman before her eyes. Despite knowing that.

There was a reason for his beauty that was unimaginable for a human. There was a reason he could go in and out of the inner palace while remaining as a man. This man who assumed the name Jinshi possessed that qualification.

Jinshi must be an alias. This man's original name should have the character 'Ka' in it. Like how Ruomen and Rakan had the character 'Ra' that was conferred to their family. The flower of the country, the character of the emperor that reigns above the three blades³.

(Imperial brother.)

Speaking of it sounding fitting, it sounded fitting.

The misfortunate crown prince who continues to hide his face.

The current emperor's idiotic younger brother, who hardly performs his work that seems like work, and just continues to shut himself inside his room.

Rather, it must be stranger that Maomao hadn't noticed it. When she tried to think really hard about it, it wasn't that she didn't notice that he seemed to have said, and didn't say, on something like this either. However, people are beings that when not clearly told to understand, they still don't understand.

She didn't know if she should say something. It wasn't just because she couldn't move her mouth properly that she just slipped her extended hand back to its original position.

Jinshi placed his palm on Maomao's rash covered forehead and closed her eyes.

"Be obedient and go sleep."

Jinshi spoke in a brusque manner unlike his appearance.

Maomao couldn't withstand the sluggishness of her body, so she decided to go along with those words.

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1. 河漏. A type of noodle said to have originated from Northern China from ancient times. Made from buckwheat and wheat flour.
 2. Ba? Ka? baka lol
 3. As a reminder: 華('flower', can also mean 'brilliance', 'best'...) is the surname of the imperial family. The country is 荔.

CHAPTER 31

RAHAN

Jinshi shuffled his feet as he viewed the document. And every time he did so he would suddenly look out the window.

“Jinshi-sama.”

His minder, Gaoshun, stared at Jinshi.

“Please focus on your work.”

Jinshi was told the obvious, but he didn’t nod obediently regarding that.

The girl who had food tasted, prepared for death, was currently in a resting condition in the inner palace. The person had once lectured that people have died from food – he didn’t know what to say about her eating that and collapsing.

Moreover, it was to quell the confusion that occurred in a place that was unrelated to the person concerned.

Therefore, Jinshi couldn’t forgive Gaoshun, his minder. While knowing what that girl was doing, let alone closing his eyes, he had collaborated with her. Without Jinshi, the master, knowing.

“...”

Jinshi, with a rebellious expression, touched the document.

“Jinshi-sama.”

Gaoshun, the wrinkles on his brows knitted, placed his hands on the documents that had formed a mountain.

“This, is information we got our hands on thanks to Shaomao. If you were to render that futile, that too is fine.”

“I get it.”

The information in his hands was about the personnel that Rakan had pointed out during the banquet. Jinshi was surprised that there were also people he hadn't imagined to be on the list of names. Also, some suspicious dust appeared when he tried slapping it.

He didn't think that they would be linked in such a place.

There was the incident from before where a high official was poisoned by his younger brother. The younger brother, who was arrested as the suspect, had died from poisoning in prison. The incident was closed while not knowing whether it was food poisoning or poisoning, but it couldn't be helped that a suspicious shadow had risen to the surface after all this time from this.

The personage who would benefit from the high official's death was among the list of names. And there were also several other things – there were also those who were involved with strange incidents that had occurred most recently. All of them were treated as accidents rather than incidents; they were all closed without knowing who were the perpetrators either. However, resultantly, there were many personages pointed out by Rakan who could be useful.

Like the saying, *If the wind blows, the bucket makers prosper*¹, they obtained gains because of this kind of cause and effect. Therefore, none of the personages concerned must think they were done in.

“It's suspicious if you say it's suspicious though.”

“We don't have any physical evidence.”

Gaoshun went as far as to add something needless.

What Maomao did, in the end, was no more than anger the man called Rakan who was the least wanted to have as an enemy in the imperial court.

Serving the poison, when this man knew that it wasn't the personages he pointed out at the banquet, it seems his interest in harassing them waned. In order to see the collapsed Maomao's condition, he had tried to break into the inner palace and had already failed around three times. Jinshi wanted him to stop using gunpowder in the

imperial court.

Amid that, the bell jingled.

Gaoshun looked in the mirror that was installed in the room where it couldn't be seen. His head tilted slightly, he waited for the visitor before the office door.

The one who came inside was a short civil official. He had a quirky hairstyle and wore round glasses. Aside from his eyes, which were slender like a fox, and his unruly hair, he was a young man who didn't look out of the ordinary.

The young man, who possessed an air like they had seen him before from somewhere, put his hands in his sleeves and bowed. Jinshi noticed there was something hanging from his belt. Concentrating on it, it looked like an abacus.

"It's an honour to meet you. My name is Rahan²."

The young man, finishing his extremely simple self-introduction, flashed a grin. When they heard the name, it was clear who he resembled.

The members of the 'Ra' family. There were only two people whose names were spoken in the imperial court. It was only Rakan and his adopted son. If you were to count the rest, there was just the man called Ruomen who entered the inner palace as a medical officer the other day.

What does the adopted son of Rakan want? They tilted their heads.

"Well? What do you want from me?"

In terms of official rank, Jinshi was higher. It is possible to say that the man called Rahan who suddenly appeared was impolite considering that point. However, it won't go well to stiffen his face here each time. There were many officials who – with Jinshi being a eunuch as the reason – call out to him with a worse impolite attitude.

"I wish to show you this."

Rahan took out a scroll from his sleeve. He passed that over to Gaoshun who was waiting. Gaoshun, while looking at it with a squint, passed it to Jinshi.

With Rakan's adopted son, he wondered what kind of meaning did the thing he

brought over had. He decided to meekly verify the contents.

He pulled the cord with a rustle. Jinshi looked at the contents.

“!?”

“What would you suppose?”

Rahan scrutinised him with an unpleasant satisfied glint in his eyes.

He indeed had a self-satisfied expression that said *What do you think, isn't that amazing*, but the subject matter written suited that.

The enumeration of words and numbers. However, it became a different thing according to the viewpoint.

“These are the things of the people my adoptive father inconvenienced the other day.”

He said inconvenienced.

Why did he say that to Jinshi?

Jinshi was not expected to be at that place. If he were to tell, he should have told a lot more people.

However, this man called Rahan had business with Jinshi.

Rahan had said it slightly piteously, but the thing he presented wasn't something that by no means garnered that emotion.

It was an account book, an extract of it. If he was a member of the post that oversaw the national treasury, that was something possible for him to inspect. Even if he was an outsider, if he followed the formalities, he would be able to inspect it.

“I considered if it was best to have you inspect the original, but the numbers had become a tad extensive, so I made an extract from the range that caught my eye.”

The man had said extract, but it was set up in a way that Jinshi, who was outside his expertise, could also understand it. What he could understand here was that it was evident that there were posts where the amount of money had changed greatly within these couple of years.

“It’s interesting. There should not have been drought nor locust plague in these couple of years, and yet why the increase in the price of grain? Finding it was strange, I also investigated the prices in town, but it was the most stable price within these couple of years.”

Rahan said it affectedly.

Taking advantage of the other price rises, it seems the price was increased little by little every month.

“And one other thing. The price of iron has also increased for some reason. For this, the price of metal had risen country-wide, but could they even be building a large statue somewhere?”

What the man called Rahan was trying to say, Jinshi understood.

Jinshi put down the scroll and looked at the young man who was cunning despite being the spitting image of his adoptive father.

If one were to speak of the price of grain, that in itself doesn’t seem significant, but the quantity was huge. If the price were to rise, the difference will become huge. Rahan was implying that they should take that difference as embezzlement.

And then, as for metal, the collective price rise meant an upsurge in demand. To say it simply, they are gathered from all over the place, in the case of building a gigantic bronze statue in order to display power, a showy project. They go as far as to melt down the gathered pots and farming equipment and used those.

If there happens to be another reason for the price rise—.

“As for me, I can investigate the circulation of money of these couple of years.”

Rahan uttered what Jinshi thought he wanted.

It was as if he came here from the start to say this.

Jinshi saw that Rahan’s eyes were appealing for something. He must have come to Jinshi with that kind of thing for that reason.

This kind of person wouldn’t move when something doesn’t match his interest.

“So, what’s your desire?”

Jinshi said directly.

As if he was waiting for those words, Rahan’s eyes relaxed.

A little awkwardly, he took out a sheet of paper from his breast pocket.

“This sum, may I have you look over this for a bit?”

Written there, was the quote of the cost of repairs of the inner palace wall.

It was what Rahan’s adoptive father, Rakan, had destroyed.

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1. Any event can bring about an effect in an unexpected way. Explanation: Wind will blow sand into people’s eyes, making them blind. So as the number of blind people increases, more people will play the shamisen as a living. The shamisen uses cat skin to make the sound boxes. So as the number of cats decreases, the number of mice increase, and these mice will gnaw on buckets, making that people will have to buy more buckets, hence making the bucket makers prosper.
 2. 羅半, Luo Ban.

CHAPTER 32

KIDNAP

A warm wrinkled hand rested on her forehead.

“You’re awake?”

The gentle face of an old man was right before her eyes.

The immaculate yet simple room, she had seen before.

“Here? This is the sanitorium in the north of the inner palace. It’s cramped in the medical office, so you’re here.”

The old man explained what Maomao wanted to ask.

Ruomen, the old man, moved his hands away from Maomao’s forehead and took hold of the cooled water. He poured it into a small teapot and brought it over to Maomao’s lips. Perhaps there was medicine dissolved in it – it was slightly bitter.

“Once again, you did the unreasonable. Because of you, there was an uproar as Rakan tried to get into the inner palace three times. Come on, don’t make such a face. He’s surely worried about you.”

Knitting her brows, Maomao drank the medicated water.

“You still can’t speak properly? You had rashes all the way to the inside of your mouth.”

He opened Maomao’s mouth and looked inside. The stinging from the bitterness of the medicine must be due to that.

“There’s congee, but are you able to eat it on your own?”

She was extremely hungry. Just how many days has it been since she had last eaten? She somehow moved her body, but it didn’t move well.

Seeing that, her dad picked up the bowl of congee and spooned it into Maomao’s mouth.

The lightly salted taste was what she was used to eating.

“Rest here for the time being. I have other work to do.”

After feeding her the congee, her dad patted Maomao’s head and left in a hurry.

(Work huh.)

Did the medical office had work like that? she had thought, then arrived at the reason her dad originally came here for. Maomao had requested him to look after Consort Gyokuyou’s childbirth instead of her.

She considered the dates. It wouldn’t be strange even if the baby was born anytime soon. He shouldn’t have the free time to leave Maomao in the medical office and look after her.

Maomao slowly extended her hands. The hands were ugly, broken out in rashes. It should take some brief time for them to be healed.

(It would be good if she could give birth with no issues.)

It would be good if she gives birth to a healthy baby peacefully without any issues, Maomao thought.



While her dad wasn’t around, it was the middle-aged court lady called Shenryu – who had once proposed a consultation with her before – who looked after Maomao. As she was a court lady with an unaffected, candid personality, even Maomao was relieved.

Perhaps some improvement had been observed since then, it seems even medicine can now be given out in the clinic. Medicine was given out along with congee. The medicine seemed to have a sleeping effect; her body became sluggish after she drank it.

“Did you request it for us? We were permitted to use medicine, though it isn’t much, since then.”

Shenryu talked to Maomao as she changed the bedsheets.

Maomao's condition had improved considerably. She can now get up and walk. Considering that she remained in a coma for a couple of days, she thought that it would have been better if she had just taken a sip of the buckwheat shaojiu that time.

"I didn't do anything."

"Really?"

When she finished making the bed with a slap, "Go sleep," she pointed at Maomao with her thumb.

If she was that skilful, she can find work even if she leaves the inner palace. Perhaps she was dazed from drinking the medicine, Maomao unintentionally mouthed it.

"Why, don't you leave the inner palace?"

It took little time for her realise it was a stupid question.

Shenryu's expression momentarily froze. It was a face like something she didn't want to remember had crossed her mind.

"...we can't leave even if we want to leave, the women of the clinic."

Abruptly, she looked at the court lady who passed through the corridor.

Shenryu as well, but all the court ladies here are middle-aged. Everyone was over the standard age.

"The flowers that have been picked once must not leave until they wither. We were always told that. As if we can leave now."

She revealed what happened to those who became the emperor's mistresses.

Based on their age, Maomao understood that they were not the court ladies who served in the era of the current emperor. They became the mistresses of the previous emperor and then continued remaining here always.

Even when the leadership was changed, the women who had passed the flowering season must have no place to go. They could only bury their bones in this flower garden.

“Your old man must not be coming today. He must be busy.”

So saying that, Shenryu held out the medicine Maomao ate before she slept.



Ring. She noticed that she heard bells.

She thought of opening her eyes, but she couldn't open them properly. Her body was sluggish.

(Still, night.)

She thought of continuing to sleep, but she was interested in the sound of the bells so there was nothing she could do. She also heard footsteps with the bell sound. The sounds were approaching Maomao gradually.

The two sounds stopped right before Maomao.

Instead, she heard a soft, innocent voice.

“The bell-sound insects, you know, the females eat the males in order to reproduce.”

Maomao somehow cracked her eyes open. There, was Shisui with a distracted expression, no, Consort Rouran.

Consort Rouran had something that looked like a book in her hands. She flipped through it and took out a sheet of paper.

“The female dies after laying her eggs, and only the offspring overcome the winter.”

While not understanding what she was trying to say, Consort Rouran folded the paper in her hands many times and slipped it under Maomao's collar. And then, she leaned the booklet she was holding onto the shelf in the room.

“Hey, can the offspring definitely overcome the winter?”

She stroked Maomao’s forehead gently.
While Maomao couldn’t move.

(Why?)

She soon understood that question.

Shenryu was behind Consort Rouran. In her hands, was a towel.

She lifted up Maomao’s rigid body and stuffed the towel in her mouth.

“You can hate me as much as you want.”

In Maomao’s medicine, there must have been anaesthetic mixed in the sleeping medicine. She couldn’t taste properly as the rashes in her mouth hadn’t healed completely so she hadn’t noticed it at all.

(I see...)

Was it Consort Gyokuyou going into labour the reason why her dad didn’t come today?
If so, the attention would be focused at the Jade Palace and the other defences would be shorthanded.
That must be their aim.

(You can hate me, is it?)

She had no idea what her intention was, but it wasn’t that she didn’t understand the reason she moved.

Maomao was at their mercy. She was stuffed into a basket¹ and swept away.



How long had she been rocking? It was a long enough time to the degree of her thinking that it would have been better to have drunk less water for the time being.

The wind coming in through the gaps of the basket was getting cold fast. There were furs packed in the basket, so she wrapped herself in that.

(Where could she be taking me?)

She was treated like baggage, but the inside of the basket was more comfortable than she expected. Besides the furs, there was a zongzi² with meat stuffing and a bamboo pipe filled with tea, but disappointingly it didn't seem like she could have either of them. The zongzi looked delicious, stuffed with chicken and jujubes, but the current Maomao didn't have the energy to let alone eat while she was rocking.

As she tasted the bamboo pipe to the extent of wetting her parched lips, Maomao thought about her current situation.

She was able to understand that they must have left the inner palace. Be that as it may that the inner palace was that much vast, they shouldn't be rocking in the horse carriage for that long. From the horse sounds she sometimes heard along with the clattering sound, it was certain she was riding in a horse carriage.

How did they go outside the inner palace?

She had no idea about that.

Just that, like she was connected with Shenryu, if she was told about the existence of a hidden passageway, that must be the end of it.

(It's full of things I don't know.)

It was a kidnapping no matter how she looked at it, but she didn't know the motive.

(Does she know that I have a connection to that man?)

She might not be a bad piece to use as a measure against a certain monocle person, but would they be not scared of that man's counterattack if they are sloppy? That being's way of thinking was completely different to other people, so she had no idea how and what would come out of that.

Besides, what would become even they used Maomao as a shield after all this time? Gaoshun, who came in to visit her once, told her that important people are held in check. Whatever they try to raise are too transparent as well. It is understandable enough that they would display defiance from getting exposed, but there must be

several people among those people who come out on such a grand scale.

(More than that, the current problem is,)

Maomao took a deep breath.

(It would be that I have a guarantee of my life, I suppose.)

Maomao didn't have interest in the government. The serious matters of the country will affect her lifestyle deeply, but aside from that, her own safety right now was more important.

From the fact that she had minimum anxiety, she thought that didn't have the danger of being killed the moment she is taken out of the basket.

No, she had thought.

The basket suddenly jolted. It seems she was taken down from a horse carriage or something. She must have been loaded onto a handcart or something, the rocking had now subsided to choppy swaying.

"Maomao."

She heard Consort Rouran mutter from outside the cage.

"Quiet down for a bit. I'll let you out soon."

That tone, rather than Consort Rouran, was Shisui's.

The girl too, must have the resolution in itself to leave the inner palace. Consorts, excepting the garden party which was a special case, are not permitted to go outside the inner palace.

Along with the solemn sound of the gate opening, a saccharine smell reached her nose.

The cart stopped. Some footsteps approached instead.

The smell thickened with the footsteps.

“It’s been a while, Mother.”

She heard Consort Rouran’s voice. It wasn’t Shisui’s voice. It was somewhat stiff, a voice lacking in individuality.

“You seem to be in good health.”

She heard a voice that was to some degree deeper than Consort Rouran’s. Together with the shuffling of footsteps, she heard the rustling sound of clothes. An extravagant dress dragging along the floor projected in her mind.

She was pretty sure that this was the woman who was the previous emperor’s high ranked consort bestowed to Shishou.

“What is it, that luggage?”

A startling question was raised suddenly.
Maomao shrank her body inside the box.

“Please allow me to bring back some luggage at least.”

Consort Rouran, no, would consort be needed now? Rouran declared it without any timidity.

“Is that so.”

It was the moment she was going to let out a deep breath, when the person openly passed through the side.

“!?”

With a stab, a sharp object protruded through the lid of the basket. It seems to be a hairpin³.

(...)

The point stopped at the tip of Maomao’s nose. To not raise her voice, she held her mouth desperately.

“Since it’s you, I thought you brought back a dog or a cat again, but I was wrong.”

“Mother hates cats. I’m not a child anymore.”

“I’m glad you grew up.”

As she spoke indifferently, Rouran’s mother stepped past and left, her clothes rustling.

Maomao could only hold her breath until she couldn’t hear footsteps anymore.

-
1. I’m not too sure if it’s a basket or a cage since they use the same character (籠).
 2. 粽, sticky rice dumpling that is wrapped in leaves.
 3. 笄, kougai. This hairpin is the simple hair stick, no dangly decoration like the kanzashi.

CHAPTER 33

SHENRYU

The place Maomao was ushered into seemed like a storehouse. The one who let her out of the basket wasn't Rouran. It was a tall woman.

"You are..."

Maomao looked at the person before her.

The woman was tall and indifferent to makeup. She had seen her many times in the imperial court.

The real Shisui. No, would it be better to call her Suirei to not get them mixed up?

She figured out the reason why she got a sense of déjà vu when she first saw Rouran. It must be because they were sisters with the same father. The air from their height and facial features were similar.

"We'll have you stay here for now. There are various inconveniences, but I believe it is prudent that you don't run away."

After saying that, Suirei opened the window.

Outside the window with iron grids, was a land of pure white snow. Maomao clutched the furs she had put on, cold from the sight of this.

"Like you had just seen, the mistress here has a violent temper. It is best that you are not discovered, and even if you escape, you won't even know where to go. I will properly bring you your meals, so I suggest you stay put."

That roundabout way of speaking is annoying, Maomao thought.

It was certainly true that she absolutely wanted to avoid meeting the lady from before, and were she to go outside, it was a land of pure white snow out there. It'll be a punch in the gut to have her freeze to death after immediately getting into an accident.

While thinking that it was futile with only what she heard, Maomao looked at Suirei.

“So, the part where you kidnap me, is there a meaning to it?”

She didn’t think she would get a reply. Just that, strangely, she wouldn’t stand it to have it cast off to the side.

“You are a person who is surprisingly useful. At least, more than you think.”

Suirei’s choice of words can be taken either way.

“Please wait.”

The woman was going to leave. Maomao called her to a stop.

“What is it?”

To Suirei who looked like she had nothing more to say, Maomao had one more thing she couldn’t set aside for her.

“What about the toilet?”

“It’s connected to that door. There’s no problem since you don’t need to go outside.”

“I understand.”

Maomao lightly dipped her head and half-jogged over to the toilet.

She didn’t know how long she held it in.

She didn’t have the free time to be shy. It was quite a serious matter.



Like Suirei had said, she brought in her meals every time for her. Though slightly cold, the simple meals weren’t bad. It’s just that there were a lot of dried food; somewhat close to portable food.

The room, now used for storage, must have been a guest room before. It had a bed too,

so she wasn't that uncomfortable. The connected toilet must have also been a remnant of it.

Maomao sat cross-legged on the bed. Her propping her chin on her standing elbows was bad manners, but there was no one here to reprimand her.

(Well then, what should I do?)

If she doesn't run away, she would be stabbed by nails – Maomao wasn't the type to listen meekly. However, she was also against exposing herself to danger.

The rashes on her body haven't healed completely and her physical strength had also fallen. If she were to go outside clumsily, death was imminent.

Maomao glanced out the window.

It was a full expanse of pure white snowy landscape.

(I must be way north of the capital.)

The Shi Clan's territory is in the north. It was correct to think that, but how far was it from the capital?

Even if she considered the speed of the horse carriage and the travel time, she figured that it wouldn't work with this snow.

(Thinking of that,)

Maomao glided her fingers across the bedsheet. She dimly recalled the map of the entire country she had memorised.

The northern half of the capital came to mind as a semi-circle. No matter how fast the horse was, it didn't appear likely that it would be further than six hundred *ri* (200km) from the capital. Within this range, places with snow in this period must be on high ground only.

(I'm pretty sure there's a mountain.)

There should be a mountain range in the north. That place shouldn't be a site that is politically important. She had a feeling that it was something Jinshi had muttered while looking at the map.

(I should've studied properly if it's like this.)

In the exam she took to become an imperial court lady, she had a feeling that there were geography questions. There's no way she was going to remember since she had slept whenever she cracked open the reference book.

What to do? She looked outside again.

(Oh?)

She couldn't see clearly with the falling snow, but were those walls she could see in the distance? No, rather than walls, those were closer to castle walls. She could only see one side, but it probably circled the building.

(A castle, and it's like a fort.)

If you were to speak of forts, it would have to be used for the military, but if the *mistress* of this place was Rouran's mother, then it must be different.

There were certainly army garrisons in various places around the country, but was there one this close?

If this kind of thing was built in a place unknown to the overseer of the country, it would be inevitable to see it as treason.

(Also, it's in a place not that far from the capital.)

Was it really correct to think that Shishou was trying to overthrow the country?

Even though Maomao had – to the point of death – incited that monacle. Does it mean that it didn't go through to that man?

Maomao swallowed the saliva that had filled her mouth.

That moment, she heard shrill voices coming down from the corridor.

What? Maomao went down from the bed and stuck her ear against the door facing the corridor.

“Young master, you can't play here!”

“Ehhh, it should be fine—. We haven’t explored here yet.”

The shrill voice seems to belong to a young boy. It seems he was pulled to a stop by his nursemaid.

(Are there children here too?)

“What are you doing— There’ll be no snacks for you left—”

“I get it okay, you can’t just eat my food.”

Furthermore, she could hear other shrill voices a fair distance away. There should be five to six of them at least.

Maomao, knowing that there are children, leaned against the wall and sighed tremendously.

No matter how much of a stronghold the castle was, it was clear that it was used for a siege.

The current emperor is a relatively benevolent sovereign. However, he still has a line you cannot cross. The court lady who was the perpetrator of the attempted assassination of a high ranked consort previously was sentenced to hanging. Her kin were exposed to physical punishment.

To preserve the authority of the emperor, he cannot avoid these sorts of measures too.

What would happen if they were to raise a tumult of this scale?

Familial extermination. Everyone won’t be allowed to live, right? It didn’t matter whether there were children or babies or not.

Did they bring their children here with that resolution?

Maomao sighed again. She hugged her legs and rested her chin on her knee.

(!?)

She sensed something out of place in her chest area. She touched her collar.

(That reminds me.)

She took out a piece of paper from her collar. It was what Rouran had left in Maomao's breast pocket.

Maomao opened it and tilted her head.

There was a trumpet-shaped flower pressed into the high-quality paper. Flowers pressed in during the making of paper, was something that seemed to be liked by a portion of the elite.

It looked like morning glory¹, but it was way larger in size and the colours were pale.

“Devil's trumpet²?”

It's a plant used as an ingredient for anaesthetic, but its poison is potent; something you must handle with care. When you ingest it, your mouth dries and you get dizzy. Depending on the case, it seems you can see hallucinations, but she has never reached that point.

What does she want to say? Maomao thought as she returned it to her breast pocket.

Which reminds her, there was something strange the girl had said before kidnapping her.

It was about bell crickets, but Maomao was completely ignorant of it. But, was there something she wanted to tell Maomao from that? Was that why she brought her to such a place?

She had absolutely no idea.

There was no point in thinking when she doesn't know. Maomao decided to change her thinking.

She looked at the things that were accumulated in the room.

There were many kinds of tableware. They were handled roughly, but they were all first-class items. She picked up one of the things wrapped in a thin cloth from the inside of the wooden box. It was a lacquered bowl inlaid with mother of pearl.

She tried fishing around for something she could use, but there wasn't anything of the

sort. They were all lacquered ware.

(Is lacquer a speciality of these parts?)

Even the casually placed table used lacquer extravagantly. The polish was beautiful. However, the ones who had a reaction from lacquer once wouldn't want to touch it. There's no chance of a reaction if the lacquer is dried, but if they touch fresh lacquer they will turn into what Maomao looked like now.

Thinking that it was just used as a storeroom, she found tools and bowls that were still in the process of being made.

(Why?)

Were there craftsmen here too?

It was a given that seamstresses and blacksmiths would be hired in a large fortress. There might also be various craftsmen here for the same reason.

There were various other tools, but there was nothing that could be useful at present.

She understood that it was likely that this place must be used to put various things that are in preparation to be moved around.

Well then, she was in a stalemate. There was nothing she could do even if she were to do something. So, for now, she laid down on the bed and pulled up the covers.

(Let's ask if there's brazier afterwards.)

She decided to sleep as she shivered. Even if a brazier was not allowed, she would like another layer of clothes.

If it was anyone else, they might retort "Do you even understand your circumstance?" Even she was shocked at her bold personality. But it's Maomao, so it couldn't be helped.

While being kidnapped and confined, Maomao was, as Maomao is.



When he entered the inner palace, the atmosphere was different.

Jinshi, leading Gaoshun and several eunuchs, headed to the Jade Palace.

Consort Gyokuyou's condition had been strange since a few days ago. He got a message that she went into labour this morning.

Maomao's adoptive father, Ruomen, had been giving her constant attendance, but it seems she couldn't give birth easily.

The consort's childbirth wasn't made public, but everyone must have realised from the atmosphere of the Jade Palace. There were court ladies coming to inquire now and again.

The moment they noticed Jinshi, they hurried back to work, faces flushed.

Jinshi was greeted by a slightly worn out looking Honnyan, and went inside. There were a large tub and a kettle placed on the brazier in the corridor, so it was ready for whenever she gives birth.

"Her condition?"

Jinshi asked, as calm as he could.

The maid's expression simply clouded over. It was the old man who came out of the room who explained to him.

"Currently the contractions have lessened. We are still not clear when she will give birth."

"And her condition?"

"The consort is currently not exhausted. She is resting."

Currently. Does that mean that they don't know what was to come?

There was another man wearing medical officer robes in the corridor. He had a thin moustache. Originally the man worked as the medical officer in the inner palace, but

he was treated unkindly by the court ladies like he was a nuisance. His shoulders were drooped, though when Ruomen whispered something into his ears, he triumphantly left the palace.

Jinshi looked at Ruomen with a dubious expression, and the old man, who read the atmosphere, politely informed him.

“Since I can’t look over my adopted child, would it be fine if I send him on a small errand?”

“There’s no problem.”

He was told that Maomao had been resting in the clinic that was in the inner palace since then. Her entire body had broken out in rashes and she was bedridden for a couple of days, but how was she now?

He was told that the man called Ruomen was, as his name suggested, a member of the Ra Clan. He had once committed a blunder in the inner palace and received physical punishment, so he walked with one leg dragging.

What kind of blunder was it? He didn’t investigate in that much detail, but that man didn’t look like that kind of person. Just that, when he heard that he incurred the empress’ wrath, he had a general idea, so he didn’t investigate it deeply.

When he told the emperor about the incident, just in case, he didn’t really get any opposition.

Rather, was it his imagination that the emperor looked pleased about it?

Anyway, there was no doubt that this personage was many times more reliable compared to the medical officer from before.

He came to see the situation, but since it wasn’t good position-wise for him to see the consort in labour, he waited in the parlour. One of the usually noisy maids brought tea over to him, but her eyes were slightly dulled.

Perhaps, the mere presence of Jinshi must have increased their workload. Feeling very uncomfortable and not knowing when Consort Gyokuyou would give birth, he looked outside just as when the medical officer from before trudged back with his shoulders drooping.

The medical officer went to Ruomen like a child who failed his errand.

Jinshi, since there was nothing much he could do, inclined his ear to the conversation.

According to the conversation, it seems he was turned away from the clinic.

As an informal place, where medicine wasn't originally allowed to be used at all, it seems they weren't really favourable towards medical officers.

"How strange. I can go in normally when I went."

"Is it because I'm bad?"

The medical officer muttered, his thin moustache more dejected.

Hmm, Jinshi stood up from his seat.

"In that case, how about I go?"

At Jinshi's proposal, the medical officer's moustache stood up with a twang. Ruomen tilted his head.

"Would that be alright?"

"Yeah. I naturally have a responsibility as well if it turns out like this."

Just the moment he was concerned.

There was nothing for Jinshi to do even if he was here, and if there was anything, Gaoshun would deal with it skilfully for him.

And so, Jinshi decided to head for the clinic.



When Jinshi led the moustached medical officer and two eunuchs to the clinic, a middle-aged court lady came to greet them.

"I want to see a girl called Maomao."

Jinshi said. The court lady knitted her brows like she was troubled.

“That girl, she’s in a slightly poor state of health so she doesn’t want to see anyone.”

It was a somewhat roundabout way of speaking.

Jinshi raised his brows in surprise.

“Then, how is the girl right now?”

She made murky expression about that too.

“...actually, I’m not looking after her. It is left to a court lady called Shenryu. The girl seems to be shy, so she doesn’t want to face us either.”

“Hoh?”

He heard something that made him want to tilt his head for some reason.

It was certainly true that Maomao had a side where she dislikes people, but she didn’t seem to be that sensitive.

If she has that side of her, he wanted to see.

And so, Jinshi walked inside the clinic. The middle-aged court lady looked like she wanted to say something, but she couldn’t oppose Jinshi so she could only be flustered.

“Which room?”

“...the innermost room on the left.”

He opened the door on the left side at the end of the corridor that smelled of alcohol. There were only two beds in the simple white room.

Inside, he approached the bed that had a bump like there was a person sleeping there.

“...oi.”

No answer. No movement of surprise.

Jinshi put his hand on the covers.

And he tugged it with all his might. Under it was a rolled-up futon that was shaped like a person.

“...”

“...the lass, did she run away?”

The medical officer inadvertently muttered the most probable answer. Because he was close to Maomao, he knew her actions very well.

However, Jinshi thought it wasn't possible this time.

He saw something under the bed.

He crouched down and picked it up. It was a gorgeous feather of a foreign bird. Jinshi had seen this before.

“What are you doing?”

He heard a middle-aged woman's voice behind him.

“Shenryu!”

The middle-aged court lady said. *Is this court lady Shenryu?* Jinshi looked.

“The girl who should be here, why is she not here?”

Shenryu tilted her head at Jinshi's question.

“That girl must have gone off somewhere again. She should be resting.”

The medical officer nodded, moustache swinging, as if he agreed.

“Is that so?”

Jinshi slowly approached the court lady. He stared into her black eyes.

“It's great that she is healthy. Will she be back soon?”

The court lady blinked once. Then her lips curved into an arc.

“I think she will return eventually. I don’t know when. She seems to have a whimsical personality.”

She blinked again and glanced out the window.

“I see, seems like I have inconvenienced you greatly.”

Jinshi said that and took Shenryu’s hand. He noticed her pulse had sped up a notch.

He intently watched Shenryu’s response. When he glanced back, the middle-aged court lady and the medical officer’s faces were deep red and bashful.

The eunuchs that came along also looked uncomfortable.

Even so, Jinshi gave a smile and whispered into Shenryu’s ear.

“So, where did you get acquainted with *Consort Rouran*?”

Shenryu’s pupils dilated in an instant. And her pulse pounded.

The inner palace was covered with lies.

Jinshi had some knowledge of seeing through that.

It was similar to the method he used to chase up Maomao in the beginning.

It wasn’t a monstrous talent like Rakan who can see through his opponent’s ability by just looking. What Jinshi can do was only the discrimination between truth and lies by observing the other person.

He didn’t have an outstanding gift. Nevertheless, with his ability alone, he can handle his work easily.

Shenryu looked at Jinshi with wide eyes.

“...I remembered my old memories.”

Shenryu regarded Jinshi with a bewildered expression.

“He called my name with a tender voice and gave me foreign sweets.”

Large tears flowed from Shenryu’s eyes.

“It seems everyone has forgotten that gentleman’s looks when he was young. I heard that he was a mere shadow of his former self in his final years. Hey, don’t you think he resembles him when you look at him properly? That voice and features, that bearing that is like candy, hey.”

Shenryu addressed the middle-aged court lady.

The middle-aged court lady, whose face was scarlet until just then, paled instantly at those words. “Eek,” she stepped back, looking at Jinshi like she saw something terrifying.

She acted like she remembered something that was the object of fear.

Wondering what was up, Jinshi reached out. However, the court lady covered her face and cowered.

“That gentlemen, won’t he ever set us free?”

It was that moment. Blood flowed out from Shenryu’s mouth.

She inserted her tongue between her front teeth and tried to bite it off.

“!?”

Jinshi thrust his hand into Shenryu’s mouth. He tore his sleeve and wedged it into her mouth.

He thought he heard a loud sound behind him. It seems the moustached medical officer had fallen over in panic. The waiting eunuchs approached Jinshi, wondering what to do, and bound Shenryu’s limbs so that she doesn’t struggle.

As the middle-aged court lady had shrieked, panicking, other court ladies appeared to see what was up. They were taken back by the unexpected disaster.

“Oi. She bit her tongue. Is there anyone who can treat her!”

A eunuch shouted on behalf of Jinshi.

The other court ladies who showed up pacified the panicking court lady.
Only the medical officer moved about in confusion with his moustache swinging about.

Jinshi passed Shenryu over to the court lady who volunteered to treat her.
And Shenryu, whose mouth was stuffed with cloth, stared back at Jinshi with her black eyes.

Like she was asking, *why won't you set us free—*.

1. 朝顔, asagao. *Ipomoea nil*.
2. 曼荼羅華, mandarake, mandala flower. *Datura metel*.

CHAPTER 34

HOLE

Jinshi raced out the clinic and headed for the Pomegranate Palace where Consort Rouran resided.

The other court ladies were shocked that Shenryu bit her tongue, but they went to treat her one way or another. At least, they were more reliable than that thin moustached medical officer.

None of them seemed to know why Shenryu bit her tongue. It was likely she had no accomplice in the clinic. And even if there were, there was another matter that took precedence right now.

The palace had transformed into a gorgeous building overflowing with an exotic ambience. There were no traces of the minimalistic appearance left from last year. Jinshi knocked on the door a little forcefully.

In little time, a maid opened the door for him.

Jinshi let out a small breath and focused on maintaining his usual smile. The maid bowed shyly and let him in.

They traversed the corridor that was set up with garish mother-of-pearl crafts and made way for the parlour as usual. The mistress of this palace was already waiting. She was lying on the coach just like usual, listlessly polishing her nails.

Jinshi squinted. There were six maids standing in wait around her. Somehow, their tending of Consort Rouran was spirited.

All of them were wearing showy outfits. They were wearing the traditional dress worn in the island country of the east. The many-layered outfits were brilliant to the eye. Though not to the extent of Consort Rouran's, the maids also wore several layers, blurring the shape of their body figures. Also, they wore make-up that lifted the corner of their eyes and exposed the contours of their faces. It was strange.

Why were they dressed up this garishly? Jinshi wanted to tilt his head. He understood that this tackiness must make the emperor wince.

No, Jinshi blinked. Didn't Maomao mention it before? About the maid called Shisui. And wasn't that maid Consort Rouran playing around in a disguise?

When Jinshi heard that the first time, he thought that was in no way possible.

The Consort Rouran Jinshi knew was Shishou's daughter. A high ranked consort that he understood more than enough.

Consort Rouran hid her lips behind her fan and whispered into the ears of a maid. He was amazed at her considerably modest way of conversing, but it wasn't anything like that.

Supposedly, if Maomao couldn't recognise Consort Rouran as the maid called Shishui, then Jinshi wouldn't either.
Speaking of what—.

Jinshi didn't sit on the seat the maid prepared and headed straight for Consort Rouran.

"What is it? Even if it's Jinshi-sama, isn't it rude?"

One of the maids said, the corner of her eyes raised. What was her name? Jinshi pretty much had the names and birthplaces, of the kind of maids and how many of them in each and every one of the palaces, in his head. However, the maids of the Pomegranate Palace wore different outfits and make-up each time, and puzzlingly, their figures were very similar.

And so, though he remembered their names, he can't match them with their faces.

Jinshi reached out, threaded his fingers through the fan Consort Rouran was holding, and flung it away.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

One of the maids shouted.

Consort Rouran turned her back to Jinshi in fright. The maids stood around her to cover up for her. This behaviour looked like they were thinking of their master, but it wasn't the case.

Jinshi gave a look to the accompanying eunuchs. The eunuchs held down the maids

and dragged them off Consort Rouran.

Jinshi gripped Consort Rouran's shoulder a little forcefully. He wrenched her face towards him.

Her face was garishly made-up, but her cheeks were dyed scarlet.

"I was pretty sure, that Consort Rouran had seven maids looking after her."

Jinshi asked for verification.

The girl, pampered as Shishou's daughter, had entered court with more than fifty attendants with her.

Jinshi, holding Consort Rouran's face, smeared off the make-up from the corner of her eyes with his finger. Revealing plump eyes with hooded double eyelids.

"Sourin¹. No, is it Renpuu²? Your name."

Jinshi smiled to not express anger towards that face. However, the face of the maid who was disguised as Consort Rouran changed from red to ghastly pale. She trembled.

"Ji..."

One of the maids tried to cut in again to deceive him, but Jinshi gave her a look. She jerked back in surprise, freezing.

"Where did the real one go?"

Was this all planned from the start? Having a large number of attendants entering the inner palace, choosing maids that look similar to her, and wearing eccentric outfits each time so no one will know when someone changes places with her?

Was this her intention from the start?

Then, what about where did the real one go?

"Where did she go?"

"..."

The maid who was disguised as Consort Rouran merely trembled. She made no sign of speaking.

Jinshi tightened his grip.

“Where did she go?”

The third time he asked, the maid who had tried to barge in before pushed herself in. She hugged the fake consort as though she was protecting her, then she looked at Jinshi, her brows lowered.

“My apologies. This child really doesn’t know.”

He hadn’t noticed it since everyone was wearing similar outfits, but this maid seemed to be several years older than the fake Rouran.

“Please forgive us.”

Saying that, the maid awkwardly looked at the fake consort’s legs.

Her long skirt was wet. Water dripped from her legs to her toes.

Jinshi released his hold on the fake consort’s chin. The fake consort’s eyes were wide. Her pupils were dilated. She gasped for breath, trembling. There were stark traces of Jinshi’s hand left on her pale neck and jaws.



The act of having the daughters of high officials enter the inner palace was actually advantageous for the emperor as well.

For the high officials, if their daughter falls pregnant, their grandchild can assume the status of the son of heaven too. However, on the other hand, there is a disadvantage.

This is not restricted to all parents, but there must be those among them who see their daughters as the apple of their eyes. The birdcage called the inner place is a place that treats the daughters that hold such value as prisoners.

For Shishou, aside from his child that was borne by a concubine, Shisui, there was only

the child of his main wife, Rouran.

Even considering how he forced her into the inner palace, it appears that he loves her greatly.

This daughter, was in the position of a high ranked consort.

While worrying about this, Rouran must also maintain the minimum criterion.

To no longer require the title of 'Consort' attached to her, she violated that criterion.

"She said that she's not coming back."

The maid from before said solemnly. The woman, Rouran's head maid, answered Jinshi's question on behalf of the fake consort. The fake consort, unable to breathe properly, was in the state where she cannot speak at all. With the reason that she resembled Rouran the most, she substituted for the consort, but it seems that she didn't know much about the circumstances.

She must have thought she was told to act as her substitute for Rouran's whims as usual.

Jinshi clenched his fist.

That was no good. He realised that the way he did it was a mistake for the eunuch Jinshi who possesses a tender smile. However, to the extent of taking a different method in that place, Jinshi's feelings were not calm.

Not coming back. Should he take that as her breaking out of the inner palace?

Breaking out from the inner palace was a serious crime that meant capital punishment at times. And if she was a high ranked consort, the crime was all the more heavy.

It was like a runaway prostitute, the pharmacist girl had said before. Going to the pleasure quarter together when the next emperor was born was, as a matter of fact, just like that girl. Jinshi gave a bitter smile.

That girl is still missing too.

He guessed that it was likely that she had left the inner palace together with Rouran.

In Maomao's case, considering her personality, there was the possibility of her following on her own accord. However, the girl's physical strength was weakened with her strong reaction against buckwheat. The possibility of her being taken away without her consent was higher.

Just, for what reason?

And how did she go outside?

The question remains.

Even though he cross-examined the head maid, he could only tilt his head. There was also the option of torture, *but that is pointless too*, Jinshi thought.

The head maid's eyes were not lying.

The maids of the Pomegranate Palace, maidservants, eunuchs, all the people related to Consort Rouran were all shut up in one place. The auditorium where that inner palace lesson was held was just the right size.

Just in case, using eunuchs, they straightforwardly worked through the court ladies in the inner palace one by one, but they haven't yet found a court lady who was like Rouran at present.

He wasn't in the condition to witness Consort Gyokuyou's childbirth at all. Although the back of his hair was being pulled³, he decided to leave it to Gaoshun.

Jinshi clutched his head in his office.

Perhaps they were in the state of emergency, Basen was with Jinshi.

He didn't have the free time to sell oil⁴ in such a place. He was brimming with the impatience to rush out and look for Rouran even now.

However, there was too little information. And even if he were to rush out now, it would only amount to finding a needle in the sands of the desert.

Therefore, Jinshi could only pace around aimlessly in his office.

Amid that, Basen glanced at Jinshi. It seems there was a guest in front of the office. He

must want to tell him to stop looking so shameful.

Nothing he could do. He sat down in his chair and feigned serenity.

The person who entered was a short man with fox eyes. Rahan.

“Did you discover something?”

Rahan, with the cost of repairs of the inner palace wall destroyed by his uncle and adoptive father, Rakan, as a collateral, was undertaking work from Jinshi.

He was quite the miser. Along with having Jinshi take on half of the cost of repairs, he had the ability to get a thirty percent discount on the quote with a negotiation with the wall repairers.

Rahan squinted, his eyes somewhat like a nasty someone, and spread out a map on the table.

“This is from around these fifteen years. It’s gradual, but there is certainly an area where the circulation of stone, lumber, metal and etc has increased.”

Rakan pointed to the north of the capital. Crossing the plains, it was on the ridge of the mountain range.

That area didn’t have a large city worth speaking about. And if there were, there was only a fortress that was used as an army garrison from the era of the previous emperor. Additionally, he remembered it was a place that was abandoned to decrease maintenance costs. It wasn’t a place where enemies would invade, and he heard that dealing with the fallen snow and so on in winter since it was on high-ground was dreadful.

“Did you know about it? The area nearby used to prosper as a health resort in the past. It is now, being distanced from the trade route, a depopulated area known for the secret hot springs though.”

“And what about it?”

Basen, who was slightly quick-tempered, interrupted Rahan who spoke in a roundabout manner.

“I’m saying there’s a sulfur spring. The quality and quantity are inferior compared the southern volcanic range, but I wonder if they can take the amount throughout the year.”

Hearing sulfur, Jinshi’s ears pricked up. It was a typical raw material for gunpowder.

The abandoned fortress. Stone. Lumber. Metal. And sulfur.

And speaking of the further north, it was close to Shishou’s territory. Even considering where the territories of the officials who were pointed out by Rakan were situated, it wasn’t that bad of a location.

It was more suspicious.

“How was it? Should I prepare more reliable numbers?”

Jinshi could only sigh. The response was more than he had expected. Instantly, Basen held the map and sent out a lower official as a messenger.

It seems that this small man can see some shape from the numbers, but it must be like that. The members of the ‘Ra’ family were truly terrifying.

“While you’re at it, can you investigate whether there is a secret passage in the inner palace?”

He inadvertently spoke of it.

“The inner palace? If I remember correctly, the largest construction work was the expansion from forty years ago. The current outer wall should have also be built then, so if there is a possibility of there being one made, it would have to be there?”

“...really?”

He knew that Shishou instigated the empress and enlarged the inner palace like it is now. Perchance, the possibility of him participating in the construction was also high.

However, if it was forty years ago, it was quite old. There’s no way he would have thought to have his own daughter use that to escape forty years later.

“If we look at the materials in those days, the contractors who were used then will know. The possibility of them being used several times is high, so shall we pick out the ones that make suspicious numbers?”

“...I’ll leave it to you.”

“Well then.”

Saying that, he took out the other half of the invoice for the cost of repairs of the what Rakan destroyed. Jinshi was to pay for half. The other half should have been in Rakan’s possession though.

“...I get it.”

Jinshi, hanging his head, promised to pay for the entire sum. The sight of Suiren condemning him with an indescribable smile, saying “Oh my my”, and the wrinkles on Gaoshun’s brow being even deeper afterwards came to his mind vividly.

It was dreadful to have Rakan as an enemy. *But I don’t want to have his adopted son as an enemy either*, Jinshi thought.

While having that much ability, it was a mystery why he holds an abacus as an insignificant official. He found himself asking that question.

“If you have that much ability, can’t you promote to a higher rank?”

At those words, Rahan flashed him a smile while shaking his head.

“In that case, I wouldn’t be able to correct the distorted flow of money then, would I?”

Numbers are beautiful because there’s no obscurity.

He once again felt that this man was Maomao’s cousin.
It seems he has a peculiar aesthetic.

T/N: Chapter title: Hole – Missing person, faults, hidden passage, hole in a certain someone's pocket...

1. 双凜, Shuang Lin.
2. 漣風, Lian Feng.
3. 後ろ髪ひかれる, painfully reluctant. Explanation: like how you can't easily move forward when the hair on the back of your head is being tugged, you can't easily let go of the regret/reluctance left in your heart and move on.
4. 油を売る, to dawdle. Explanation: From the Edo period, hair oil peddlers gossip with female customers as they sell their wares. Passing time while neglecting your work.

CHAPTER 35

SHENMEI

Monotonous days are boring. Maomao was unable to put up with that, unfortunately.

With that in consideration, Maomao was, in a sense, thankful that half of this room was being used for storage. Fishing around the pile of goods yielded some rather interesting things.

(Th-this is!?)

Under the lacquer bowls and plates, there was a paulownia box crammed with books. The box had signs of damage in various places; it looked quite old.

Though the silverfish damaged books were tattered, it could still be read. And above all, the contents made her eyes shine.

The books dealt all the way to flora and fauna that were originally foreign in this country.

The books, which were about one *sun*¹ thick, were labelled 'Insect', 'Bird', 'Beast', 'Fish', 'Tree', and 'Grass'. They were numbered like there were continuations, but there were only ten volumes here. It seems that there were at least several volumes still missing.

Maomao flipped through the pages of the book that was labelled 'Grass'. There was one genus per page, included with explanations. The literary style was a little antiquated, so it was hard to read.

(Woodblock printing huh.)

These are quite old, Maomao thought. Paper seems to have become valuable within these couple of decades. Due to that, she had heard from her dad that the woodblock printing technique that prints a large quantity of paper is greatly unusual nowadays. Novels for amusements aside, honestly, the demand for illustrated books had been restricted, and furthermore, if they were to publish continuations, it must be before the regulation of lumber at least. She wouldn't think they would get their money's

worth.

(The content is good though.)

Maomao, who can't get tired of reading it, flipped through the pages, her eyes blazing.

When she did so, she raked in the small text or something that were here and there. The characters were slightly quirky. It seems like they were supplementary to the illustrations.

Maomao's eyes blazed brighter. She carefully flipped through the book page by page, flying through it. She only looked over the pages that had the supplementary text carefully.

Her whole body got goosebumps. The contents were unexpectantly so exciting she got goosebumps.

Some parts of the description were mixed in with a script that wasn't this country's characters. It was the same script as the foreign medical book that was burned in the past so that Maomao couldn't read it.

But not only that, the handwritten passages of that script were all on the special characteristics of the plant and its use as medicine.

She understood that the person who had owned these books took part in medicine, and additionally, he had studied abroad in a foreign country like her dad.

(To think that were such a person aside from dad.)

She was super excited to meet him.

However, that reminded her of something.

Why were that person's things in this kind of place? Then she arrived at a certain possibility.

"Don't leave them around."

Since when had Suirei stood here? There was a basket containing food in her hands.

“Since when?”

“About the time when you started to wriggle your body with a strange smile and your hands on your cheeks.”

“...”

Maomao slowly averted her eyes and closed the book with overwhelming sorrow. Thinking that she will continue reading when Suirei wasn't around, she stroked the book as she returned it to the paulownia box.

“Just saying, these are my grandfather's things so please don't lose them.”

Murmuring that, Suirei set up the dishes on the table.

(Grandfather...)

Maomao recalled Suirei's personal history.

The medical officer who was banished from imperial court for laying his hands on a court lady. And Suirei's mother would have to be the child who left the inner palace with that medical officer.

Supposedly, if there was something different, Suirei's mother would have been a blue-blooded princess who was raised with the butterflies and flowers². However, the words 'supposedly' were actually distant from the empty reality.

In order to hide the emperor's peculiar inclination, what happened to the medical officer who had the crime blamed on him? And then, this Suirei who called that person grandfather would have to be—.

(There's no point bearing a grudge.)

Was the reason for her being in this fortress now from that?

Maomao didn't understand the women called Suirei. Similarly, she didn't understand Rouran either.

Even if she thought hard on this, Maomao wasn't Suirei nor Rouran. She figured that it was a given that she didn't understand.

And more than that, there was something she was more interested in.

“Can I meet that person you call grandfather?”

She made a request that didn't read the atmosphere. Maomao understood, considering her current situation, that even if she said such a thing it was futile.

But she couldn't not ask.

“...he's no longer around. He was always confined in this room, and passed away five years ago.”

Maomao dropped her shoulders, crestfallen, at the smooth reply.

(Confinement huh.)

In other words, after he died, his room became a storeroom. That's why her grandfather's things were left underneath.

Speaking of that, she also understood the reason why there were grids on the window and the toilet connected to the room.

“He was told to make the elixir of life for the mistress here.”

Maomao's eyes once again shone at those words.

There was no omnipotent medicine; the elixir of life was also the same. Her dad had already told her, but she couldn't help getting interested when she heard it.

Suirei took out the 'Insect' and 'Fish' books from the box and read over it adeptly.

“Did he achieve it?”

“He wouldn't be dead if he achieved it.”

She said the plausible.

Maomao's personality was also on the cold side, but this woman called Suirei was even more so.

“If he made it, he can make up properly to the mistress here.”

Saying that, she passed the book over to Maomao.

“Also, please don’t make a racket. Your voice went all the way outside just then.”

Maomao covered her mouth with her hands.

Suirei, taking the empty basket, left the room.

For a moment, she heard noisy voices from the other side of the opened door, but was it her imagination?

Maomao decided to work hard on reading for a short while as she stuffed her cheeks with the prepared meal.



When she noticed, it was dark outside. As if Maomao’s presence was a secret, she wasn’t allowed to put lights on as she pleased.

While thinking that she wanted to read for a bit longer, Maomao laid down on the bed.

The former medical officer who was said to have researched eternal life, you can see how outstanding of a person he was by looking at the addendum notes.

(He’s no match for dad though.)

Wouldn’t that make him a capable person that is second to him? Maomao thought.

She was aware that she raised a creepy voice whenever she found the names of plants and animals that she didn’t know, and knew the kind of effect which parts had.

(Not good, not good.)

She covered her mouth when she thought that, but this time her limbs wriggled.

It was *that* interesting.

However, it was good enough as a time waster for Maomao, though she was quite

helpless when it came to research. There must be other various tools, but were they taken away?

(I want to see more.)

She closed her eyes as she thought that. She ruminated on what she learnt today. Firsthand, aside from the text written in the book, there were papers slipped between the pages like a bookmark in several places. The papers pressed with various plants were just inserted right into the pages.

Maomao fumbled around and took out the paper in her collar.
It was likely that this was pulled out from what was slipped among these.

(Huh?)

Maomao inadvertently got up. She tried to get off the bed to check the contents of the paulownia box, but it was a dark. She couldn't see.
She missed her footing, and ceremoniously crashed onto the floor.

(Uooh!)

There were a loud sound and the thing she was leaning against fell. The box full of lacquer bowls fell directly onto Maomao's belly, and she cried out like a frog getting crushed.

For a short while, though she squirmed around, she held her mouth.

Although she was slightly drawn back by the pain, she put her ear against the door.

(No one noticed right?)

It was when she was going to sigh deeply as she rubbed her belly.

(!?)

When she thought she heard a click, she fell forward with a thump.

Half of Maomao's body had fallen into the corridor. She could see silver embroidered shoes before her eyes. The long skirt was made of silk, and when she shifted her gaze

upwards, she saw a middle-aged woman.

The woman was wearing garish hair ornaments and clothes. The nails of her ring finger and pinky were around two *sun* long, and had tortoiseshell nail guards on. However, a crooked smile emerged on her face. Her face, which must have been beautiful before, produced a different twistedness with the wrinkles from her age.

There were two maids behind the woman, smiles practiced at their master. There was a pale-faced Suirei behind them. It was like she was saying to Maomao, “What was that racket?”

(Yeah, crap.)

“I knew there was a gutter rat mixed in here.”

As she cackled loudly in delight, she looked up and gazed backwards at Suirei. That calm, cool and collected Suirei’s complexion worsened.

It was a voice she heard before.

It was the person who stabbed the hairpin into the basket when she entered this fortress, the woman who was the former high ranked consort, who was Shishou’s main wife, who was Rouran’s mother.

Was it time? Or was it a different cause? The one called the peerless beauty was already gone. As she laughed with her face reversed, she approached Suirei as her hair swayed. Maomao was aware that Suirei was trembling from the ghost-like movement.

“You can’t keep dirty creatures, right?”

The woman, when she thought if she was going to raise her right hand as she laughed, struck.

The two nail guards sliced Suirei’s cheek. A red line oozed. And then, without missing a beat, the fan in the woman’s left hand smacked Suirei’s temple.

(Nasty.)

She purposely changed her direction like there was no wind resistance, and went to hit bone. Suirei covered her face, and repeated, “My sincerest apologies”.

The maids who were smiling at the back, weren't smiling in their eyes.

"How dreadful. In any case, this must be Rouran's wilfulness."

As she said that, she grabbed Suirei's hair, and tugged her face closer. And then, contrary to what she expected, she licked the flowing blood.

(...)

"No matter how you dilute noble blood, it's the end if you mixed it with filthy blood once."

The woman wrapped up the paper that had been tucked into her outfit with the spit mixed with blood, and threw it on Suirei's head.

And when she thought the woman was going to leave in satisfaction—.

"That's right, that little rat."

She wasn't forgotten.

(It's fine to forget me.)

On the contrary, Maomao was held down from the top by a man who seemed to be a guard, and forced back into the room.

"The children working underground, someone call them up. Even this kind of thing can be comfort."

Saying that, the woman left with a cruel smile.

Suirei, with a pale face,

"My sincerest apologies, Shenmei-sama³. My sincerest apologies."

earnestly apologised.

(What an exaggerated name.)

Maomao thought as she watched the mistress leave from the gap of the closed door.

1. ~3cm.
2. 蝶よ、花よ, a child brought up with tender care and affection.
3. 神美, Shen Mei. Divine Beauty.

CHAPTER 36

POISON MAIDEN

It seems, Rouran's mother, Shenmei, is a woman who is as good as her word.

As she had promised, two men showed up at the room not long after.

Maomao had hidden the contents of the paulownia box under the bed. She probed around in the dark, and only pulled out the papers that were slipped between the books.

(I failed.)

Perhaps, she wouldn't have been noticed if she didn't make such a loud sound. However, it was also likely that they had suspected it to no small extent from that situation. But Maomao had needed to check the contents of the box immediately.

Why did Rouran bring Maomao all the way to such a dangerous place – even though she thought she was going to solve that mystery, it seems there is no time to allow her to think.

She figured she might be discovered sooner or later, but it had to be in the worst-case scenario.

The lighting in their hand brightly illuminated effeminate faces. Their clothes were threadbare, stained with black splotches here and there. The moment they entered, she was assailed by a characteristic stench, and reflexively covered her mouth.

With vulgar smiles, they approached Maomao who was sitting on the bed.

Maomao wasn't that much of a child to not know why these guys were here. Being one raised in the prostitution quarter, these are faces she would go as far as to call loathsome.

It was honestly extremely unpleasant. She had thought of trying to escape, but that was a pipe dream too.

For just a bit, she had hoped that Rouran or Suirei would do something about it, but she resolved herself into thinking that it was better to not hold herself to such faint hope.

(Two people?)

There were less than she had expected. She had thought there would be more.

“Let’s get this over with quickly. Since we’ll have to switch over in half an hour.”

So that’s how it is. It seems they will be coming in shifts. No, that is still troubling though. To speak of how troubling it would be, it would be to the point where a deep thinking young lady would pale and drop to a dead faint, and a haughty girl would bite her tongue off before she falls under their hands.

As for Maomao, if possible, she would prefer to not be met with this kind of experience. Even if she’s like this, she’s still a virgin, and above all, the men before her eyes look filthy.

It didn’t matter whether they were filthy or injured, for Maomao, her life is the most important. That is, she considered the best way to survive this with minimal injuries.

(Don’t they have some disease?)

She had to be resigned to the fact that contagious diseases come with external wounds to begin with.

Even with her attempts to escape, one person may be fine, but there are two. Even after that, it is extremely unlikely for this to end with no issues if she is held back.

One of the men put the lighting on the lacquered table. The room was illuminated in a dim light.

“Woah.”

One of the men blatantly grimaced.

“What the hell. Isn’t she covered in rashes?”

Maomao's entire body is still covered in rashes. She must look like an ugly woman with her usual freckled face.

One of the men, as though he lost energy, went off to sit on the table, but the moment he touched it, he sprang off it like he was repelled and went far away.

(What happened?)

The man went to sit down against the wall, rubbing his hand with the hem of his shirt.

"I'm good. Do whatever you want."

"Why thank you."

The man seemed to be a gross eater; it seems he was fine with even Maomao. *You can have better standards*, Maomao thought.

She turned away from the face of the approaching man, and he seized her head.

"Be obedient. Otherwise, I'll hurt you more."

Saying that, he tugged Maomao's hair and forced her down onto the bed. Just as when she felt his grip on her hair slacken, he bounded both her wrists this time.

Sticky spit dribbled from his dirty fangs. Black grains tumbled from the man's body.

Maomao, like she was turning away from the man's face, inspected the grains that fell on the bed. She had a feeling she had seen them before.

During that, her outer garment was torn off, and a tepid slug crawled along the line of her neck. Her thigh was stroked.

It was extremely uncomfortable. But she focused more on the fallen black grains.

(Gunpowder?)

It looked like sand, but she got that conclusion from the stench that was currently emanating from the man. Burning this gunpowder will release a stench that is like rotten eggs. It was made from sulfur, saltpetre, and charcoal.

The men must have come from the basement. In other words, are they producing or manufacturing gunpowder underground?

(Are they going for a full-blown war?)

As she was thinking about that, teeth were pressed against her shoulders.

“What the hell? You have zero reaction?”

The man slapped Maomao’s cheeks uninterestedly.

(Pain is pain.)

Though, it wasn’t to the point of making a sound. She didn’t have the free time to make such a reaction right now. But, as if he can’t stand the fact that she was making no sound, he slapped her again.

“Oi, stop that. What are you going to do if you make her filthier?”

The other man said as he leaned against the wall.

“Whatever.”

While saying that, the man put his hands around Maomao’s neck.

(This b*stard.)

There is occasionally this kind of guys among the guests of the brothel. They torment the prostitutes and feel sexual arousal from seeing their faces screw up in anguish.

Seeing Maomao’s face screw up from suffocation, the man laughed. He tightened his hold on her neck.

Seeing the man’s arousal, the man at the back stood up.

“I’m off to take a leak. Don’t overdo it.”

The man left the room like it was bothersome. He must not find it enjoyable to see other people getting it on.

(No?)

The man's gaze flickered towards the table. He rubbed his hand against his hem again.

She heard a click – it seems he didn't forget the lock. *He probably won't be back until it's time*, Maomao thought as she breathed heavily. The man licked his lips.

"You're not crying at all huh."

It seems he was dissatisfied with that.

The man took out a small knife from his breast pocket. He removed the sheath. The blade gleamed.

"How about this then?"

Smirking, he dropped the small knife right next to her face.

"-!?"

Her right ear suddenly burned. Not her earlobe, the top part of her ear. She noticed something hot flowing from there. The smell of rust rushed into her nose.

(This b*stard.)

It seems, he ignored the guy's previous warning and ran with his own desire. As if he was turned on by the voice she let out, he started to rock his body.

With both her hands bound, the weak Maomao couldn't shake free. Taking advantage of that, the man took the weapon between his teeth, and leisurely traced a line along Maomao's neck to her chest. With a thin layer of skin cut, blood welled upon her skin.

He then spat out the blade, seemingly satisfied with that, and slowly loosened his belt with his free hand.

It was the moment he rolled up the bottom of Maomao's garment.

(I planned to stay quiet though.)

She had no plans of holding back. It was the exact moment her body was lifted, so it was easy to aim.

First, she kicked into his solar plexus. It seemed it went well – the man couldn't make a sound as he vomited spit.

The restraints around her hands loosened.

Maomao pulled the sheet and charged at him as she thrust it into the man's mouth. There was a large crash, but people can, by all means, get the impression that they were doing *something* impressive.

Maomao cannot stay pinned down. She will put an end to it before that.

She mercilessly swung her leg down into the livid man's crotch.

“!!!!!!”

The scream that should have rushed out from his stuffed mouth was killed by the sheet. Only bubbly drool leaked out.

The disastrous spectacle of the man, she didn't want to speak in detail. No doubt it's a situation that is painful to watch.

However, Maomao isn't kind enough to feel sympathy for him.

The red line and blood clotting ran from her neck to her chest like a twisted earthworm. Was it because her ears were roused? The blood wouldn't stop flowing.

I'm so done. She wiped it with the edge of the sheet.

She wanted to properly stop the blood flow, but she had no free time.

(I probably have no time.)

To have the men called through an alternation in the middle of the night, wouldn't that mean that there are still other guys working? Also, it is evident that working with gunpowder at night is dangerous. And yet, if there is a reason for them to continue working—.

They are urgent to start a war.

It was a good luck that the man had stepped out from his seat. If there were more than two people, Maomao will be at a loss for what to do.

However, that man should be back soon.

Before that, what Maomao should do is...

Maomao looked at the pile of goods.

She decided to try for high-stakes.



Should be about time now.

The man, slowly lifted his back, and headed to the earlier storeroom. If they were late, he would be beaten up too – it was the man’s consideration that they should finish this quickly.

It’s fine unless they get ineptly make it dirty though.

When he thought that, maybe he should have guarded that room. But the man didn’t want to be in that room.

His whole body somehow felt itchy. He scratched his stomach.

He stopped at the door and turned the lock.

“Oi, hurry up and...”

The man widened his eyes. *Sh*t*, he thought.

He went inside and hurriedly shut the door.

What the hell did he do, this b*stard?

The room is a mess.

There is blood everywhere and the woman is collapsed on the bed. The top half of her body is covered in blood and she isn’t moving.

The curtain is fluttering. Was there violence? The glass of the window is broken. The man shuddered in the cold wind.

*That b*stard, where the f*ck did he go?* The man looked around. No, before that, is the woman still alive or not?

Certainly, they were told to do however they liked, but it's a different case if she dies. He thought of how many people will be held back after this. Even at the best of times, they weren't allowed to take a break. He would be beaten up the other guys.

The man approached the woman and looked at her injuries.

There is a thin cut from her neck to her chest. It was when he was going to check whether she's dead or not.

He touched something sticky on her cheeks. And just like that, he went to touch his mouth. An iron taste spread out on his tongue, and he inadvertently turned away.

"Heh?"

The woman's hand moved. Her bloody hand grabbed the man's wrists this time.

The woman looked like she's still around the age of a girl. The woman is overly-skinny, but her eyes are blazing like burning fire.

"Do-don't threaten me."

The man shook the girl's hand away and let out a breath. She is still alive. She is in a terrible state, but for now, she is still breathing. He was relieved that things are still fine.

No, could he be relieved?

Though the girl is here, the other person isn't.

Where did he go?

As if the girl saw through him, she pointed with her bloody finger at the pile of goods.

The man is sitting like he was propped against it.

There are red rashes on his face and hands. And blood is flowing from his mouth—.

“It seems my skin doesn’t go well with mouths.”

The girl’s voice, somewhat alluring, reminded him of the women of the brothel he happened to pass by once. Different to the streetwalkers, it isn’t just flirtatious, it’s the voice of a woman who knew her own worth.

“Oi, what did you do!?”

At the man’s question, the girl replied indifferently.

“Nothing. He shouldn’t have injured me.”

The girl said, touching her ear. Was it cut by a blade? A small triangular notch is missing, and blood still oozed from it.

“I’m, a poison maiden.”

“Poison... maiden?”

The man repeated back the unfamiliar words.

“Indeed. I was raised holding poison since I was young. The blood that flows in this body is concentrated with the poison I have taken in until now.”

“What kind of bullshit story is that?”

“Bullshit story? Is that so?”

The girl tilted her head as she smiled. Her bloody fingers touched her own cheek.

“You’ll know soon. The rashes will appear as the poison spreads.”

“!?”

The goosebumps on his skin are faintly mixed with red rashes.

The man edged back in shock. The girl neared as though she was chasing him. She slowly drew closer, and before he knew it, he collided with the pile of goods. In his surprise, he found himself sitting on the box there.

He thought of running and escaping to the outside of the room, but before he noticed the girl had turned her back to the exit.

“Do-don’t come any closer.”

“How cruel. Is it because I’m this kind of ugly woman?”

The woman tilted her head, and smeared her face with her bloody fingers.

The flickering light illuminated the girl’s face.

His opponent is a little girl. He shouldn’t lose when it comes to strength. He could just push her down and go outside the room.

He wanted to quickly wash away this poison. The red rashes are rapidly spreading to the man’s arm, spreading to his face; he felt like scratching it all off.

“If you want to run away, go right ahead.”

The girl took out a small blade from her bosom, and thrust the handle towards the man’s forehead.

The small knife is in the sheath; it isn’t the blade that was thrust at him.

However, the man couldn’t move his body before.

The girl hadn’t put energy into it. She had only held the small knife against his forehead.

“!?”

“I have a request.”

The girl said as she stared at the man.

“What are you doing in this fortress?”

He could only say it is suspicious, to be asked what he was doing. However, he couldn’t speak of it. To him, the mistress is scarier than the girl before his eyes.

She had said poison, but his hands were merely covered in rashes. He thought that he

wouldn't die if he didn't put it in his mouth like that guy.

"What are you doing?"

The girl, expressionless, asked once more.

Let's wait a little more. Then, the guys who are out of patience will be here. Unfortunately, the lock is still open.

That was what he thought.

"Is that so?"

The girl raised a leg and rested it on the man's abdomen. And then, she lightly pressed down.

"!?"

"Even so, my gender is female. Everyone says that it's unbelievably painful, but to what extent?"

Her toes stopped at his lower abdomen. She rested her whole weight on it.

The girl slowly closed her eyes. Slowly opened them.

A smile full of affection emerged in them.

"Right or left, which one do you want to leave?"

The girl said to the man, in a gentle voice like she was soothing a child.

T/N: The idea of poisonous maidens seems to have come from India. Also, the LN version had her stuffed in a basement with loads of snakes and creepy crawlies (Classic Maomao happily ate them all...).

CHAPTER 37

CLAN OF INSECTS

Maomao had wiped down her entire body but she still felt gross. Her body had been covered in blood. However, the amount of blood wasn't as much as it looked.

She looked at the man who had fainted frothing in his mouth. The blood on him wasn't just Maomao's.

She had made use of the red lacquer paint in the room as blood. The mixture of paint and oil yielded a brilliant red paint. The blood had accomplished its job perfectly in a room with a single flickering light source. The rash on the other man was also from this paint.

It was a relief that it turned out well.

Maomao had half-spoken about the poison maiden thing, but as if that kind of fairy-tale-like thing exists. If you were to just eat poison continuously, you'll quickly die.

The fortress, maybe because the airtightness was high, was comparatively warmer than the snowy exterior. People's bodies will go out of whack without them knowing if they suddenly get hit by the cold wind after breaking the windows. Not just goosebumps, they could get rashes as well.

On top of that, there was one other thing.

The time the man entered the room, he had said "She's broken out in rashes," when he saw Maomao. Her whole body was certainly broken in rashes, but seeing how he declared that with certainty, she thought that, perhaps, he must have seen something similar.

Also, as soon as he touched the table in the room, he reacted with surprise and distanced himself.

The table was painted with lacquer, but as long as it was dried, you rarely get skin irritation. People who had a reaction once would end up excessively avoiding that

feeling.

Sometimes, they could develop a rash on their body just by thinking that they touched it.

That was why she used the lacquer as blood. In actuality, it will take time for them to be affected by rashes, but people who are weak against it would be more mentally insecure. Even if she didn't understand the said person, they will recall the time they got a reaction from the scent.

If she were to speak honestly, it happened that half of them came in even if they were to harass her afterward*.

Maomao made use of that, and acted as a poison maiden.

When the man sat down, there was also a reason why he couldn't stand up.

When you sit on a chair, human bodies were made so that you can't stand up when your foreheads are held. When you first get up, your head moves forward. If you are unable to do that first motion, the other parts of you cannot move.

Even so, there might be other ways of moving, but the confused man reacted in the way Maomao had said.

It was a godsend that he moved too compliantly. If this man didn't leave his seat originally, about this time, she would have become the victim of another person. She was grateful for that point.

And so, after hearing what she asked, she only stepped on him without crushing them.

As soon as she left the room, she passed by the men who turned up to swap over. They went past Maomao, not paying attention to her as if they saw her as an apprentice.

The lock on the room was closed just in case, but there was no time left.

(This isn't a joke.)

Maomao clicked her tongue as she ran down the corridor. She had deceived them by wearing the outer garment she had plundered from the man just then, and had her ear

wrapped in a cloth.

Hearing that they were manufacturing gunpowder, Maomao had imagined hand cannons¹ or fire lances at first. Either one were tools that were used in wars since olden times.

However, the man said cannon.

Cannon. A weapon that shoots out projectiles you put inside a gigantic tube. Cannons were wooden or bronze weapons that had been around since olden times.

He said that they were making a thing that shoots with iron bullets.

As far as Maomao knew, rocks were typically used as projectiles. What would become of it if they made it from iron?

Maomao didn't know about weapons in that much detail. However, she understood that using uniformly shaped metal bullets had more destructive power than irregularly shaped rocks. It might be an artillery that used the latest technology.

But, it was still too reckless.

She only knew about of the scale of it from the number of people in this fortress. Suppose there were co-operators that endorsed the Shi Clan, it might be a different story. However, their scheme should have already been exposed. How many people will support the Shi Clan after all this time with the risk?

And yet, they were still trying to raise this thing.

Do they know what will happen from here on?

Maomao continued underground, descending the stairs step by step. She could feel the rumbles of the production from the interior along the cold stone wall.

Maomao quietly looked inside.

There were several tens of slightly dirty men working topless. A characteristic scent reached her nose. Rather than the smell of burning sulfur, it was the smell of fermenting manure.

She could see a huge mound of some black clumps.

(Manure?)

No, it was small for that. It seems to be droppings from small animals like mice. She heard that beast dropping are among the ingredients used for saltpetre. That must be used as an ingredient.

The underground was warmer than she imagined. The room temperature must have been raised to dry the completed gunpowder. Thus, it was terrifying.

The brazier was kept at a distance just in case and was wrapped around with a curtain so the sparks don't catch. Still, if the fire spreads, what would happen?

Do they know that danger, being in this environment?

Generally, if you are always in a place with such bad air, you would eventually breathe in too much of it, and get poisoning symptoms.

You can say the environment was poor.

The completed gunpowder was transported out via a different exit. If she were to chase after that, would she get to the armoury?

But, how shall she go there?

As she thought that, she heard footsteps behind her.

Maomao hid behind a nearby shelf.

Her heart pounded loudly.

Maomao looked at the person who showed up, worried if the people around her would notice that sound.

“ ... ”

Maomao was dumbfounded. She looked at the person who walked past.

It was Rouran who was walking with a meek expression. Rouran, who wore an extravagant outfit like her mother, was an ill-matched existence in this space that was

cloying with the smell of excretion in the dim underground.

“Roura...”

Maomao tried to call out to her.

However, the girl didn't hear her voice, and with something strong contained within her eyes, continued to walk towards the centre of the underground.

The men who were working around Rouran noticed her and started to be noisy.

One of the men nervously came before her. He seems to be the man who manages this place.

“Young la...”

“Please leave here right away.”

Her dignified voice echoed all throughout the underground.

The men looked at one another, not understanding what was up.

“This fortress is going to fall soon. Before that happens, I want you people to quickly get away from here.”

Saying that, Rouran took out a large bag from her bosom and threw it aside. Silvers spilled out from it. The men, dazzled by the sight of it, started to scramble forward to gather them up.

After affirming that they were almost finished with picking them up, Rouran held up the light in her hands and flung it away with all her might.

The light drew a parabola and fell into the dried gunpowder.

“Try your best to get away.”

Rouran wore her previous innocent smile.

Maomao covered her ears without a moment's delay, and crouched down on the spot.

The roar passed through her palms, reverberating into her eardrums. The men who were escaping in haste kicked and stepped on Maomao many times.

The explosion rapidly expanded, spreading to the charcoal and droppings.

(I have to quickly get away.)

As she did so, someone impressively fell down beside her.

The beautiful fabric had been dirtied from being trampled on many times. Maomao pulled up the hands of its owner who had fallen over.

“Huh? Why is Maomao here?”

Rouran, her hair dishevelled, made a blank face.

“That’s what I want to ask you though.”

She said that with a shocked expression. Rouran brushed Maomao’s cheek, and reached for her right ear.

“Blood. Does that mean I was too late?”

Speaking of what she was late for, it must be that. It seems the reason Rouran came to such a place and suddenly blew it up was to save Maomao.

“...quickly go.”

Maomao covered her mouth with Rouran’s sleeve, and somehow crawled out of the basement. *We need to get out of here now*, she tugged Rouran to go outside.

However, Rouran went to the steps and ascended the stairs.

“The fire is spreading.”

“It’s fine. I have to go up.”

Rouran went up the stairs, dragging her tattered skirt along.

The smoke was quickly rising. Her eyes stung with the stench that made her nose feel

strange. Even if the fire didn't spread, she might end up dying from smoke inhalation.

"Are you coming along?"

"I guess so."

If it's this situation, it would be easy for Maomao to run away. The men who had escaped earlier on had scrambled towards the fortress' exit. Would they break into the stables or whatever, and escape from here?

"It'll be scary if Mother knew. Since it's about that person, even if they stay, they would be pressed to take responsibility for what happened. It's better to end it with whipping."

At the speech about her own mother, Rouran cast down her eyes.

Rouran stopped before the room on the second storey².

Maomao grasped the papers in her chest. She didn't even take one of the books that were in the room. She had only taken the papers that had been hidden under the bed.

If she were to separate from Rouran right now, it will end with her not knowing her goal.

She wanted to make sure of that.

"Hey..."

Maomao stopped momentarily and wavered on what she was going to say. Rouran was no longer a consort. It would somehow be a bad fit to suddenly call her Rouran. And so, she decided to call her this name.

"Shisui."

"What is it?"

Her hands on the doorknob, Rouran, no, Shisui smiled.

"The abortion drug ingredients that appeared in the inner palace, was something that Shisui arranged, right?"

It was likely that she used Suirei who was outside the inner palace, or another person.

Shisui continued to smile.

“It’s for me to use.”

Shisui’s expression was unchanged. Still smiling, she opened the door.

“Maomao really is sharp. It’s worth calling you.”

Shisui said.

The insect that has a call that sounds like a bell, eats the male in order to beget offspring.

The insects she received from Shisui, had eaten themselves in the cage without even eating the vegetables she gave them. Maomao released the surviving insect in the garden. The surviving one must have been female. She will lay her eggs on the ground, and then she will cease to breathe as well.

The description was in the books in the paulownia box.

She understood now. That the one Shisui called an insect was herself.

If she begets a child, she will eat her father.

The insect cage signified the inner palace. The male and female insects denoted the emperor and the consorts.

She also understood the reason why Shisui often appeared in places with insects. She might have been taking the opportunity to harvest other things while she was collecting insects.

Ground cherry to white-powder flower. The ingredients that can become abortion drugs are also in the inner palace.

There was a large bed inside the room. There were five children sleeping there in a row.

The voices of the children she heard a couple of days ago must be them.

Shisui continued to open the doors from the guardrail. The curtain fluttered, snowy wind rushed into the room.

“We have to get the children outside.”

“There’s no meaning even if they go out.”

Shisui, no, it was Rouran’s voice who said it this time.

Rouran looked outside with a smile.

It should have been a pitch black scenery devoid of anything. Maomao had only seen the white plains that extended beyond the outer walls in the daytime at a distance from the grid of the window.

Watchfires were rising. She could see groups that looked like ants coming in while assembled in ranks of troops.

And then—.

There was a loud bang.

“What?”

The underground explosion must still be going on.

Maomao rushed over to the bed and looked at the children.

Even with such a loud sound, all the children remained sleeping without a stir of surprise.

Maomao felt one of the children.

“!?”

His skin was cold. Maomao picked up the child’s hand and felt for a pulse with her finger.

“!?”

All the children were cold and had no pulse.

There was a pitcher on the side of the bed. There were cups for the number of people here.

Rouran affectionately stroked the brow of one of the children.

“Was it you who did it?”

Rouran nodded slowly.

With eyes filled with affection, she stroked the children like they were her own. Whether she was Rouran or Shisui, Maomao no longer knew.

“If we do such a flashy thing, it would be familial extermination. That much is clear.”

Even if there were young children, they will be included among them. They will go up to the gallows while not knowing the deeds of their parents.

“I made them drink it mixed with sweet juice. It was after everyone happily looked at picture scrolls in a warm room. I suppose there was a grumbling child? He looked like he wanted to sleep with his mother, but it’s unfortunate. Your mother is having fun with my mother.”

Rouran displayed a crooked smile with the corner of her mouth.

There was a heavy sound of the onslaught outside, but beyond that, she didn’t take her eyes away from Rouran’s face.

“My nanny said she wasn’t that kind of person in the past, but what of it? She was that kind of woman when I was born. She bullied Elder Sister every time she found her, even bullied the young maids, and taught the female relatives to drink and play with male prostitutes. Father said nothing, he didn’t oppose her, he just waited for Mother to forgive him.”

Her mother, Shenmei, was mad. She had known just by seeing her.

“After she gave birth, she had her husband as food. Just like an insect. It’s much better to be an insect, they do it with their lives connected to their offspring.”

Rouran hated the idea of becoming a mother. To the point of making abortion drugs

herself and continuing to drink that.

Maomao felt that she heard her biggest reason.

All the mothers in the world, are not the same as Shenmei. But for Rouran, her mother was just Shenmei.

“About Maomao, I investigated a little. Your personal history is somewhat like Elder Sister.”

About how she was raised by a former medical officer. About how her father was a high official.

“I have neither a father nor a mother. I only have an adoptive father.”

“Fufu, Elder Sister also said something similar. I guess so, I guess so. Elder Sister always said that she wasn’t my Elder Sister. It’s possible. What if, as harassment to Father, a woman from someplace might have just forced Elder Sister.”

Her tone changed again.

She no longer knew whether this woman was Rouran or Shisui.

However, the woman had something she wanted to tell Maomao.

“That woman, is not my older sister.”

Not my older sister. In other words, Rouran voiced that Suirei wasn’t related to the Shi Clan.

(Liar.)

Rouran and Suirei look really similar. In particular, her current expressionless face was truly really similar.

Rouran adores her older sister.
And yet, she called her ‘that woman’.

“If these children are insects, they will overcome the winter.”

She said and stroked the children once again.

(If they are insects.)

Maomao realised once again.

Silently, she pulled out the folded sheets of papers from her collar.

One sheet was the devil's trumpet paper Rouran had left. The rest were the several sheets that Maomao had pulled out from the books.

She took out a sheet among those.

There was a fish fin was pasted onto it.

It was Maomao's favourite food. It was delicious to drink the wine steeped with the fin.

Maomao looked at Rouran wordlessly.

Rouran's eyes were brimming with tears.

When Maomao was going to extend her hand, Rouran shook her head.

(We should run away.)

Maomao thought.

But, she didn't know what to do afterward.

Maomao knew nothing about politics. She had no interest in such things. She only wanted to study lots about medicine, research, and make all sorts of medicine. Just that was fine.

Just that should have been fine.

She didn't care about other people. The most important person was herself. She wondered what she was exposed to, having been brought here.

But, Maomao extended her hand.

Rouran refused her.

“I have my role. Don’t stop me.”

“...is there some meaning to it?”

She didn’t know what is in the place she is heading towards. But, she could easily imagine the ending.

“I guess I can only say it’s obstinance if I say if there’s any meaning to it.”

“Then, wouldn’t it be better to run away?”

At that reply, Rouran gave an impish smile.

“Say, Maomao. You have an unknown poison. What would you do if you only have one chance to drink it?”

“I’ll drink it all up.”

She replied immediately. It was about what other paths there were.

“Thought so.”

Rouran said that, and stood up with a smile.

She left the room with light steps as if she was going shopping.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

The door closed with a click.

Her footsteps quickly faded.

Maomao was facing up before she realised.

The back of her eyes was hot. She desperately held it in.

The brief time she endured, the building shook with the rumble that gradually got louder.

Two drops of water fell, soaking into the pressed devil's trumpet.

Jinshi POV next.

1. 飛発, feifa. I only found this term in Japanese sources, and it stated that this contraption was the precursor to fire lances (火槍, which was invented during the Song Dynasty.) that was invented during the Tang Dynasty of China by some nameless person. If anyone knows the English equivalent name for it or something, that would be super helpful. The author calls it 'gun' as the modern equivalent – should I just with this? Hand cannons came a little after fire lances so it's not quite the right term.
2. or Third story/floor depending on where you live.

CHAPTER 38

STRATEGY

Going back a little in time.

While rocking in the horse carriage, Jinshi was face to face with a person he can't deal with.

It was called a horse carriage, but it was drawn by ten horses, making it closer to a mobile house than a carriage. There were furs spread out on the floor, and a roundtable was set in the centre.

Rakan, the personage whom he had expected to be grinning per usual, was currently scowling over a map with a look of annoyance. Behind him, his adopted son, as he scrutinised Rakan and Jinshi's countenance, was studying the state of the cashflow invoice of his wallet. Money opens all doors – it was as though he was going to act depending on the state of it.

The man called Rahan was the greatest miser among the people he met so far, but Jinshi wholeheartedly felt that it was a godsend that he was present this time.

Jinshi was currently in the state where it couldn't be helped if Rakan hit him at any moment.

Gaoshun, who was standing in wait behind him, was also prepared to draw the sword at his waist at any moment.

Raising your hand at Jinshi, meant that there was no other way than to be cut down by Gaoshun, but the current Rakan must have got into Jinshi's horse carriage thinking of wanting to hit him regardless of that.

Rakan had already seized Jinshi by the collar before departure.

It was when he was told that his daughter Maomao had disappeared from the inner palace.

Rakan doted on Maomao. Being deemed not a father and being treated lower than dirt

and bugs didn't matter. Jinshi recalled Rakan's cut-off spiel at the banquet seat from the other day. The hand he had injured then was still wrapped in bandages. It also looks hard for him to hold a brush.

He surmised that Maomao had followed or was taken along with the former high-ranked consort, Rouran's escape.

Beyond her escape from the inner palace, was Jinshi's responsibility.

Shishou, as well as his close relatives, were already gone from their estate. He surmised that the clan had barricaded themselves in the fortress.

And Rakan, who was honourably defeated from charging at the inner palace three times, cannot forgive Jinshi for that. He had screamed, close enough to his ears that it hurt, that if she was close at his hand, this sort of thing wouldn't have happened.

Jinshi had known too.

Even if there was a secret passage in the inner palace, even if none of the people concerned knew about its existence, he had no intention of avoiding responsibility.

He had confronted the contractors who carried out the building project in those days, and made them spit out whether there was something like a secret passage. There was no honest person who would meekly confess that they made a secret passage, but he gathered that the workers who were already dead had made such a thing.

There was a small shrine dedicated to deceased court ladies in the inner palace. They had discovered a secret passage skilfully hidden in the floor there.

It was Rakan's nephew and adopted son, Rahan, who had stopped Rakan when he was going to raise his hand at Jinshi.

"Father, this is just for example, but in the case where you raise your hand at the imperial family, would that crime end with just the person concerned?"

Rakan was stopped with that roundabout remark.

Raising a hand at Jinshi, meant familial extinction. Even Rakan's daughter, Maomao, would be a target.

Rakan had known who Jinshi was. There were not many people who can deceive his eyes.

Rahan as well. Jinshi had wondered perhaps when the man came for negotiations the other day, but it seems he really had noticed.

When he asked Rahan what's up with that, he replied with a Ra Clan-esque answer.

"Your height and weight, the measurements of your chest, torso and etc., they're all the same numbers after all. That kind of person is rare."

Rahan as well, had known it from seeing it in a way that other people didn't understand.

If it's like that. Thus he specially allowed him to come along as Rakan's assistant while being a civil official.

The current Jinshi wasn't the eunuch named Jinshi. There was a silver *kanzashi* slipped into his bundled hair. He was wearing thickly padded bluish purple armour, not his usual official robes.

Jinshi and the others were marching. And as they advanced, they were revising the strategy.

"Is this truly fine?"

"There's no problem."

It was Rahan who replied.

The map that was spread out was a drawing of the area around the fortress that stood on the mountain ridge.

As the fortress hadn't been used for a long time, the map was considerably old, but they assembled senior military officers who had been stationed there before and re-edited it.

It was positioned with the mountain at the back and the plains in front of it.

Above all, Rahan had predicted the possibility that they were making some kind of firearm.

The area had lots of lumber. As a forest resource, it was a locality that was wanted so badly one could taste it, but it had been protected by the Shi Clan for generations.

Hot springs gushed out in a nearby area. He was told that there was the possibility that they are obtaining sulfur from there too.

“What about saltpetre?”

They *are* making gunpowder. It was another ingredient they required.

“Maybe it’s because there are hot springs? There seems to a large cave nearby where small animals can pass the winter easily.”

He was told that caves accumulate a large amount of bat droppings. It seems that it is possible to produce saltpetre using animal waste as a material.

Jinshi groaned. If they were to use firearms, it wouldn’t be the type of things called hand cannons. They are deploying weapons that collectively aim at enemies from the castle walls.

It was a little troubling that they are using cannons.

Rakan had already known what Jinshi had come up with.

He must be seeing the map that was spread out right now as a mere Go board.

Rakan pointed to the cliff behind the fortress.

“This is theoretically possible.”

Rahan said plainly.

“If you were to speak of possibilities, this would have to be the best way of doing it logically.”

The strategy that Rakan had planned was suppression without allowing the use of cannons.

The gunpowder used by cannons gets moist very easily. Even if there is enough gunpowder left beside the cannon as the occasion calls, it would have to be normally stored in the armoury for it to stay dry.

In particular, the fortress is on high ground. A terrain where snow always falls. According to the scout, it seems that it was snowing heavily tonight.

They'll be marks if they were to march normally.

And so, Rakan suggested eliminating the armoury first so they cannot use cannons, but that method was too outrageous. Being outrageous but possible to implement, was a scary part of this man.

"I think this method is a greatly economical."

Did Rahan get lured by the words "economical" that got pressed forward? He had a feeling that he understood this small man's personality too well in this short period of time.

"Quickly suppress them, we have to rescue Maomao. Papa is coming to save you!"

He wanted to smile wryly at the words "papa", but there was no way he could do that.

Jinshi recalled the short girl as he chewed on his lips.

Was she taken as a pawn, or was it for a different reason? Or did she come along on her own accord? He didn't know.

Just that, if she was in the midst of the enemy, he wanted to take her out as soon as possible. Her body was so skinny like it would break. She shouldn't be in perfect health yet.

Jinshi squeezed his fist.

"Let's go with that."

"Please wait."

It was Gaoshun who cut into Jinshi's decision.

"There's a problem."

Gaoshun, brows furrowed, got onto his knee and made a suggestion.

"What's the problem?"

Besides Jinshi, Rakan and Rahan also tilted their heads.

“About the march this time, have you forgotten?”

It was a single brigade commanding the troops. It can be said the number of people was over-sufficient considering the scale of the fortress. If the strategy devised by Rakan went well, he would think that there would almost no damage to themselves though.

“The imperial guard doing a surprise attack?”

Ngh, Jinshi backed up for an instant.

Slowly, he touched the *kanzashi* on his head. Touched the symbol of the imperial family that was shaped as a *kirin*.

He had been a eunuch for a long time; he sometimes forgot his own position. The current Jinshi wasn't Jinshi. Gaoshun wasn't Gaoshun either.

Considering his own position, he must gain control with the poise befitting that. He got it, but the words that came from his mouth were different.

“I approve the captain's judgement.”

“...I understand.”

Gaoshun drew back acquiescently.

His gaze was turned towards the man behind him.

It seems the man's glowering look was piercing the back of Jinshi's head.

“That's a relief. I have no interest in making a cup from a skull.”

Saying that, Rakan scoffed, and left the tent. It wasn't a funny joke.

Rahan flipped the abacus, making sure there was no mistake in the calculations.

“...-sama.”

It was Gaoshun who called Jinshi by his real name.
The deep wrinkles on his brow were knitted.

“After this, you’ll have to change the way you deal with that girl.”

Gaoshun said, his tone like he was soothing a child.

“I get it.”

Jinshi sighed tremendously. The atmosphere was cold; his breath turned white.

He shivered and put on the white overcoat that snugly covered up to his head.



The deafening roar came after midnight.

What’s the matter? Shishou got up and strapped on the sword left at his bedside. Although he went to bed, there was no way he could sleep. Though he was called the Raccoon Geezer in the Imperial Court, his delicateness of going through sleepless nights stayed with him.

There was no way he could sleep.

For these couples of decades, he couldn’t sleep even when he tried. That’s why his eyelids had darkened and produced eyes circles just like a raccoon.

As if they were surprised by the rumbling, the coquettish voices that came from the room next door went silent. The lustful female voices turned noisy.

On the other side of the wall, his wife must be gulping down wine. Simply for show, she made the woman of the clan assume improper appearances and play with the men she bought with money. That, was the daily routine of his wife after she gave birth to his daughter Rouran.

She purposely indulged herself in pleasure in a place that Shishou would notice.

The women with her had been perplexed at first, but were now enjoying that amusement. She had delighted in the degrading of chaste wives, dragging over those

who had already given birth, those who had done their duty as wives.

She hadn't been that sort of woman.

Shishou went out onto the balcony and looked outside.

He had wondered if it was an enemy attack. The lights of the army, most likely imperial guards, were still far away. This fortress, being on high ground, gave an extensive view of a couple tens of *ri* ahead. There should be enough time to just take a nap.

Mmm, Shishou noticed a strange stench intermingled with the wind.

Was it the stench of sulfur?

Gunpowder was being made underground. *Did that explode?* Shishou realised.

I knew it, he gripped his collar

I must do something about it, even if he thought, he couldn't move. It was miserable. He can't put energy into it.

The person highly favoured by the empress. The personage unmatched by the emperor. A sly, cunning old man.

The Shishou that was called such in the imperial court, would have to be a completely different to the current Shishou. He even thought that of himself too – it could not be helped.

He carried his belly that had suddenly protruded after passing his forties, and walked onwards step by step. Him going out to check the situation required him passing the room his wife was in. That act was unbelievably painful.

The female bestowed from the previous emperor, no, his betrothed who was finally returned to him after twenty years, during the time she was in the inner palace, had gained a thorn.

The time when she finally returned to Shishou's side, he already had a wife, already had a child. The child, was Shisui.

His wife, not just a thorn, also gained venom.

That venom killed Shisui's mother and continued to undermine Shisui.

He had to deal with her quickly, otherwise-

Persuading himself, he finally opened the door to the room. The male prostitutes were surprised, and the women, with their remaining shame perhaps, covered themselves with the covers in a panic.

Only his wife was stretched out on the couch, smoking a pipe. Clear colours of scorn appeared in her sharp eyes.

"What was that sound just now?"

She grumbled as she blew tobacco smoke.

I am going to check now – it was when he was going to say that.

The door on the side of the corridor was opened with a loud bang. Standing there, was his daughter covered in soot, Rouran.

"Your disgraceful appearance, what is up with that?"

"I don't need to tell Mother and rest of you."

Rouran said over her shoulders starkly and looked at the women who were struggling for the covers.

"I don't need to tell you people who leave your children and throw yourselves into pleasure."

At Rouran's words, the woman who finally remembered her children was going to rush out. However, Rouran slapped that woman's face. When the woman crumbled down to the side, the male prostitutes ran away, finally knowing the severity of the situation.

Is this my daughter? Shishou wanted to tilt his head. He had thought his daughter, named Rouran, was a meek child. He had thought she was a child who behaved like a

doll, who wore clothes like her mother told her.

Rouran strode into the room, and opened the sliding doors that were lined on the shelf. When she opened the largest door, he noticed that there was a young woman imprisoned within the narrow space.

“Elder Sister, I’m sorry. I’m a bit late.”

The trembling woman was bound up and tortured. Her face was really similar to Rouran. It was his other daughter, Shisui.

Shishou’s face twisted. He knew she was getting beat up, but to think that it was like this.

Rouran released Shisui, rubbed her back.
And then she looked at her father, Shishou.

“Father.”

Rouran grinned.

“Please take responsibility for the end, at least.”

What responsibility – there was no time for him to ask her back.

The rushing sound gradually got closer.

“!?”

When he thought there was yet a different rumble, the fortress shook in its entirety this time. He found purchase with the walls, and as he supported himself, he went out to the balcony again to see what just happened.

He could see snow falling. The east side of the fortress was pure white, he couldn’t see anything. What happened? He didn’t know at first.

And then, he noticed the place where the snow had slightly settled. The building that should have been there was buried in snow. If he remembered correctly, that should be where the armoury was.

However, snow had surged into it, burying half of it.

Rouran called out to the dumbfounded Shishou.

“You should have known that they are an enemy you cannot beat. Please take responsibility.”

For I shall take responsibility for Mother, she said.

His daughter, her singed hair swaying, went to stand in front of her own mother with dignified poise.

Take responsibility. Shishou clenched a fist at his daughter’s sentence.

CHAPTER 39

TRAMPLED SNOW

Don't do the impossible, Rihaku thought.

Before his eyes, Shishou's private army who couldn't properly deal with the sudden intruders were panicking. Though they brandished their spears as they panicked, they were no match for Rihaku's people who had come here perfectly prepared.

Right now, Rihaku was here to capture the rebels, the Shi Clan. The location was five hundred ri north of the capital. Them repairing the fortress that should have already been abandoned and having soldiers must be something like that. It was equivalent to thinking that they are retaliating against the emperor.

The fortress was moderately large, but it was truly foolish to plan an uprising with just that. According to what he heard, the fellows who had planned the uprising had broken up internally, and it was only the Shi Clan who came to be unyielding among them.

The head of the Shi Clan, Shishou, was a personage who was quite respectable even within the imperial court. He was a person that emperor was no match for, to the point where he chased out the previous high-ranked consort and installed his own daughter on that seat, though-.

Rihaku tilted his head as he swung his staff.

He didn't know if they were lost in their greed, or they have gone mad.

Just that, be as it may that they were driven to a wall, since they had disappeared from the capital and barricaded themselves in this kind of place, they couldn't be the type of people to be treated as rebels, right?

That the personage who is called the Raccoon Geezer even in the imperial court wouldn't do such a foolish thing.

However, Rihaku was a military officer. He'll leave the over thinking to the other guys, and finish the job.

He slammed the staff on an enemy soldier's leg and swept him off his feet. His

subordinates in white overcoats were tying up the fallen soldiers behind Rihaku. Rihaku was also wearing the same overcoat, but he had just taken it off with it being in the way.

The white overcoat stood out with the blood splatters. It was a costume that was essentially inappropriate for battle, though—.

It was a colour that blended in with the white of the snow. It was just the right thing to disappear into it. Also, they would stand out even less in a moonless night.

Rihaku's troop were marching without carrying torches. The unit had split into two groups en route to the fortress. The leading infantry unit who were assembled being used to the snow and had pride in their skill, and the rest of the unit. The two were mobilised a couple of ten ri apart.

As a result, speaking what happens, at night, the fortress lookout would notice the lights carried by the unit at the back, and wouldn't notice the unit that had approached in advance. They would be mistaken to think that the enemy's arrival would be a while later.

In that case, Rihaku's unit had another problem.

They were walking on the plains that had nothing since a couple of ten ri ago. It was a different matter if even the stars came out, but even the moon was hidden by the clouds. It was normal that their sense of direction was muddled.

Rihaku, for a moment, let out a breath after he finished capturing the enemy. During then, something fell out from his collar.

"This thing is thought up really well."

Rihaku picked up the fish-shaped wooden sculpture that had fallen onto the snow. They grasped the location of the fortress according to this.

There was a magnet inside the sculpture. You'll know your bearings when you float this in a bucket of water. It's a tool used by sailors.

The surface of it had been rubbed on with some mysterious powder that shone. He could see which direction even in the dark. It seems the raw material was a mushroom that glowed in the night.

Also, with this surprise attack, there was one other bonus.

With a look of surprise, Rihaku thought when he saw the surging snow from the top of the cliff.

“The guy who thought of this strategy, what kind of mind does he have?”

One of the reasons this fortress was abandoned came from the following facts.

He heard that places close to hot springs have lots of earthquakes. There was a large earthquake a couple of decades ago, and the surrounding topography seemed to have changed then.

The slope of the mountain had crumbled, making avalanches appear in winter since then. Though the scale itself was small and it wasn't something that occurred frequently, the location was bad.

Since it falls right on top of the building, the deterioration of it progressed, and they got right on to reducing the size of the army.

He was told that this time's was artificially induced. It was based on the fact that this year was colder than average and the snow was also deep.

Several people used to the snowy mountains had been taken along by the leading unit. If he were to figure out where they were going while bearing a large number of fire lances, it must be for this.

He looked around. Fresh blood scattered in the air. The red spots were stark on the white snow. One of his subordinates ran a sword through the chest of an enemy soldier who continued to struggle. The soldier collapsed, caught off-guard; he was out of luck to brandish his dagger.

He coughed, feeling the bloody froth overflowing from his mouth. His movements faltered and stopped.

Don't take their lives if they surrender. They should have been told that.

It would have been fine if they just listened obediently. Did they not have that composure? Seeing that scene, the men around them went compliant.

Beyond the possibility of being able to take lives, they must not be heartless. Rihaku was taught that, had taught that.

He located a personage treading on the dirty snow, entering the fortress.

His black hair looked very stunning with his white overcoat. Rihaku, who couldn't imagine himself thinking about that towards a man, smiled bitterly at this situation.

This man originally shouldn't be on the battlefields. His handsome visage was the gardener of the flower garden known as the inner palace, and was also counted as one of its flowers at the same time.

However, in reality, he wasn't a 'flower¹', but a 'Flower²'.

In his hair that was half down and had the remaining half in a bundle, there was a silver kanzashi. You can do nothing but prostrate before it when you see that design.

It was the thing above the three blades in the country called Rii. There were only two individuals unique in this country that bore names with 'Ka³'.

This was one individual.

Originally, he should not be on this ground. He was in the night march, and had also walked tens of ri in order to not make a sound. The unit was assembled with those with physical strength, but he could see his fatigue.

However, the owner of the graceful face that was like a celestial maiden, was wielding a liuyedao⁴ that didn't match him. He was clad in bluish purple armour, which indicated his existence to his surroundings.

Eunuch Jinshi, that should have been that man's position. The young eunuch highly favoured by the emperor, with a beauty that, at times, went as far as to spread insolent rumours.

When he appeared before he took command of the army, several people must have dropped their jaws in shock. There were also officials whose complexions had blatantly gone bad. That lord, who was popular with both men and women, had been wooed by even men at times.

Rihaku was also one of those in shock. A few days ago, he was entrusted with various matters from Jinshi's close aide, a man called Gaoshun. This time too, being called to assemble those with strong physical ability in the cold among his associates and own

subordinates was something like this.

His name wasn't Jinshi anymore, but Rihaku cannot call him by his 'Ka' name. There was no one aside from the emperor who can directly call him by that name even in writing.

Jinshi went inside the fortress. Rihaku followed so he doesn't fall behind. Gaoshun wasn't by his side, instead, a young military officer kept close to his back.

Rihaku also went after them.



The inside of the fortress was shrouded by a cloying stench. The stench was like rotten eggs. As he wondered what happened, there were men carrying clumps of snow to the underground.

Could a fire or something have broken out underground? When Rihaku caught a man who was carrying snow in a panic and asked him, that was the case. He was told there was an explosion.

"We h-have to be put it out quickly, or the m-mistress will..."

The trembling man looked away from Rihaku.
Rihaku released the man.

He didn't know if his bad complexion was due to the smoke, or that was he scared of this mistress or whoever.

However, they might have made such a miscalculation that there were fewer soldiers in the fortress than they had expected.

Rihaku covered his mouth with his sleeves, and went down on his knee behind Jinshi who was standing in the lead.

"A word of advice?"

I'm thankful that I can speak from the other side, Rihaku thought.

“Permitted.”

“Then, I shall presume upon your words.”

He always regretted that he should have studied language properly for moments like this.

“I believe there is no need to remain in this smoke for long. Shall we have the people inside promptly leave as well?”

“I get it.”

Did I say the obvious? Rihaku reflected.

“However, there might be people inside who can’t escape.”

“In that case, we shall have everyone search, outside.”

“We cannot do that.”

At Jinshi’s words, Rihaku’s face twisted. He thought it was good that his face was bowed down.

For Rihaku, it was intolerable for Jinshi to get injured. He wanted him to go outside as soon as possible, even if it was to observe from a safe place.

However, on the honour of the Imperial Guard, Jinshi was also required to come out in front. Precisely because they were launching what appears to be a surprise attack, he might not relinquish that part.

His showing his face to the public majestically like so, meant that he was throwing away the eunuch Jinshi. It must signify that he was living, not as the useless shut-in imperial brother.

With that, the harmony of the imperial court will collapse at once. The Shi Clan that was once a cut above the rest was in this state. Those guys must be mixed with the captured enemy. It was good that they were captured, but their crimes were settled. It was standard that those who retaliate against the emperor will be sentenced to familial extermination. The hopes on the extent of how the reigning emperor’s kindness will deal with them must be faint.

“Captain Kan’s daughter is captured here.”

“That is...”

Captain Kan, in other words, the weirdo tactician. Rihaku was told this before they broke into here. He was surprised that man had a daughter, and why she was captured was also a mystery, but that was all he was told.

“Can we abandon her?”

They could not.

“A new political opponent will be born.”

His mouth slipped.

He had a feeling that a small amount of something was revealed within Jinshi’s stiff expression.

“Ahh, I guess so.”

As he revealed a bitter expression as though something was tearing him up, Jinshi went ahead.

Rihaku got to his feet and scratched his head. If it’s like this, he should finish his job as soon as possible.

Chapter Title: The snow that was used to base the strategy on, and the snow that was stepped on.

CHAPTER 40

RESCUE

There was a giant cascade of snow that came with the deafening roar. Maomao knew that it was called an avalanche from her knowledge.

The snow surged like a waterfall from behind the cliff's top. The snowy cascade quickly stopped, not flowing all the way down to where Maomao was, but the place she assumed was the storehouse disappeared under a flurry of snow.

Maomao watched that scene from the balcony.

Due to the underground explosion, most of the workers had run away, and the ones left were fighting the fire. Moreover, the other personnel would have to split up if there was an avalanche coming. There were soldiers flying out from the outer wall – she could see that they were dumbfounded by the situation.

Then, there were people who couldn't escape that situation.

White somethings broke into the outer wall that had become short-handed. She couldn't see them clearly with their protective colouring from a distance. However, they confronted the panicking soldiers, and she could see something red flying. Blood splattered on the pure white snow.

The white somethings were invaders. When they took off and threw away their white overcoats, they revealed themselves as soldiers.

Maomao recognised the one leading them.

Even though he had changed his clothes into armour, it was detestable that his elegance was still the same. His hair danced with every swing of his blade. Even though he was on a bloody battlefield, it looked like she was watching a sword dance.

(Did he come to suppress them?)

A high ranked consort escaping from the inner palace, was equivalent to treason.

Furthermore, with her family having barricaded themselves in this kind of fortress, they had no excuse.

Then she looked at Jinshi's appearance.

Those with the social position to wear bluish purple on their body were limited. She wouldn't think that Jinshi was at this place as a eunuch.

It was a little relieving, but she still can't let down her guard yet.

There was still the stench of sulfur in the air. She could end up getting poisoned, being here for such a long time. How was the situation underneath? The fire wouldn't spread much as the fortress was built of brick and stone, but she had to pay attention to the smoke.

Even if not, it wasn't limited to not rousing Shenmei's frenzy either. Basing on how she treated Maomao, the woman might not have realised that she was related to the weirdo monocle. Also, she didn't think Rouran would slip her mouth.

Had it turned out like so, Maomao had planned to jump down from the balcony, land on the snow and run away, but-

That would be the worse case scenario.

From the balcony, Maomao looked at the prone children who look like they were sleeping. It was just pitiful that they were pale, not breathing and had no pulse either.

(We should have just run away.)

That went for Rouran, and for herself as well.

Maomao had no idea what Rouran was going to do from here on, but she felt that she only understood why Rouran brought her here.

It was due to that reason that Maomao couldn't leave this place.

Intense footsteps approached. She heard the sound of metal.

The door was kicked opened just as she heard something fall heavily.

A soldier in a white overcoat came in. The overcoat was patterned like red dots

scattering on a white background.

“...you are?”

In his confusion, he squinted at Maomao.

“Oi, what is it?”

Approaching them was a voice she recognised. It was the mongrel she knew who unexpectedly appeared.

“Is this person the one?”

He asked the mongrel soldier, Rihaku, for confirmation.

Rihaku crossed his arms and tilted his head. He approached her with his brows furrowed.

“Awkward question. I have a feeling that you look like a girl called Maomao who works in the imperial court.”

“I’m that person.”

Rihaku was asking a stupid question, but he was in armour rather than his usual official robes. There was a staff in his hand.

“Why are you here?”

“It seems I was abducted.”

The angle of Rihaku’s head tilted down even more to almost horizontal.

“Hey, is your daddy...”

“It’s probably as you imagine. Please cease from mentioning that name. I’ll understand if you call him that old man or something.”

Rihaku stopped speaking in response to Maomao’s request, but he was blatantly shuddering. Afterward, he smacked his fist into his palm, looking like he strangely

understood.

What did he understand in his thoughts? She had no idea, but it was somewhat aggravating.

Rihaku pointed to Maomao and said, "It's this person, this person". The subordinate made a dubious expression as he pulled out a flute from his breast pocket and blew it.

"Welllll, my bad my bad, it's like this if you say so. That aside, you look filthy. Huh? Your ear hurt?"

He was a rude guy as usual, but he came over peering at her in concern. The military officer with a somewhat detestable personality was also bathed in blood splatters, stinking of iron when he came closer.

"Stop it with the injuries. That old man, he said that he was going to come along even though he couldn't even move properly. He couldn't move as expected."

He really used "that old man".

It must be that old man who thought up this strategy. *Even the avalanche occurring, there was no mistaking that old man did something*, Maomao thought.

She had wondered if Rihaku was a guy who didn't get a sense of wariness, but then he instructed his subordinate to stand by the door as a lookout.

"What is this? Are the children sleeping?"

Maomao spread out her arms and stopped Rihaku from getting closer.

"They're not breathing. They seem to have drunk poison."

Rihaku's face contorted at Maomao's words.

He must think it is a cruel scene. However, even if they were alive here, their only path is to go up to the gallows.

Even with the attempted assassination of a high ranked consort, the person concerned was sentenced to hanging, and their clan more or less had their fortunes seized.

This time there was no other way but that.

It didn't matter whether they were woman or children. Everyone would be executed.

Maomao wanted to ascertain a certain matter from Rihaku who was displaying a pathetic expression.

"The executed ones, are they thrown away?"

"Of course not. They are interred in a dedicated graveyard. It's only just that they are cremated."

"Can we let them, at least, have a memorial service with their mother?"

At Maomao's words, Rihaku made an indescribable expression. He tugged his hair roughly and groaned.

"I don't know. This kind of thing ain't my job."

However, Rihaku came closer and lifted up one of the children. He ripped up the blanket, tore up half of it and bundled the child in it.

"They look like they're sleeping. I thought about getting them together, but they're quite heavy."

Rihaku said, and he wrapped the next child with the rest of the blanket. He ripped up the bedsheet in the same way, and bundled up the next.

When she thought that there wouldn't be enough cloth for the last child, he ripped up the overcoat of the subordinate who was keeping a lookout at the door.

"Oi, call for another two people to come."

Saying only that, he then carried the children under both of his arms.

"Rihaku-sama?"

"We can't hold a memorial service for them together, but leaving them here is also like that, right? We can just secretly bury them close to the graveyard then."

Rihaku grinned, showing white teeth.

“Would you get accused of a crime?”

“Who knows. But, in that time you can do something for me.”

“Even if you say *something*.”

Maomao crossed her arms sullenly, and Rihaku made a look like something had occurred to him.

“Oh, you have a good hand.”

“What could it be?”

Rihaku said, and his lips curled into a grin.

“If you call him papa even, wouldn’t that old man do whatever you ask?”

It goes without saying what kind of response Maomao made to those words.

“...sorry. That was nothing.”

Rihaku immediately looked away and apologised.

It seems she had made that face.

CHAPTER 41

HAND CANNON

Jinshi could hear the ear-piercing sounds of a flute.

He felt his thread of tension loosen slightly. They had agreed to sound the flute when the target is found. If there is an abnormality, it would be in a series of short tones, and if there are no issues, a long unbroken tone.

Seeing how it had ended with a single long tone, there had been no issues whatsoever. Or at least, that must be how it was handled.

Jinshi came out of a long corridor. He recalled the rough sketch he had looked at beforehand – there was the banquet hall and the office ahead, then the living quarters.

Basen was behind Jinshi. Gaoshun should originally be in this position, but that man had his own job. Basen always had the habit of raising his right shoulder when he took over his father's job as a substitute.

“Don't be too on guard.”

Jinshi said, in a voice only Basen can hear.

There were another two military officers behind Basen.

“Then, please allow me to go ahead.”

Jinshi understood what Basen wanted to say. Position-wise, he must want to fortify Jinshi's guard front and back.

He snickered, going to push open the heavy door, but then, all of a sudden, he had an unpleasant premonition.

He told everyone to keep away from the front of the door.

He then opened the door, and in that instant, hid his body behind a wall.

That moment, a bullet passed through Jinshi's side with an ear-popping sound.

“This is!?”

Basen’s face contorted.

“It is within range as hypothesised.”

You would have to prepare hand cannon at least if you were to prepare gunpowder. The weather outside was bad, and besides, there were limited places where you can use hand cannons that took time to load. It can only be used in the fortress in a place that was spacious enough for it.

And it was as Jinshi had expected. There were men in the hall who were reloading bullets in a fluster.

“LET’S GO!”

With Jinshi’s yell, the men bearing the hand cannons panicked and drew their swords, but it was already too late. Hand cannons are originally weapons that are used in alternations. If the first shot failed, there was no time to reload bullets.

There were about five people in the hall, all of them were wearing first-class clothes. He could recognise some of the faces among them. The large room with cold stone flooring was teeming with the characteristic smell of gunpowder.

“Where did Shishou go?”

All the people here must be members of the Shi Clan. Their subordinates who remained from the lost battle were not around, he could see that their engagement with hand cannons was a last resort.

“You have no plans of speaking?”

“W-We don’t know! We didn’t have that intention.”

One of the men spoke. As his spit flew, he looked at Jinshi with desperation, but since he seemed as though he was going to spring on him, he was immediately pinned down by Basen.

“We were just lied to.”

He continued to speak as his face was pressed down on the floor.

“Shameless!

His face was forced further down by the irritated Basen.

“You bastards embezzled the money of this country. The proof that you’re using this fortress is what is left! And besides, with you setting up weapons like that, what do you think we can get from just that?”

Basen held the edge of the sword against the man’s neck. The man, who had spit on the side of his lips, stiffened his face.

“W-we don’t know! We were told that this was for the country. We were just, for the country...”

The sword slashed the floor. Sparks flew as blade and stone collided. The man’s eyes rolled back; he could say nothing more. A wet spot spread out across the floor. The other men were silent as if they didn’t want to expose such an unsightly appearance. Only fear surfaced in their eyes.

Don’t look at me with such eyes – Jinshi couldn’t tell them.

No matter how much compassion they sought from him, he was handing down a decision he couldn’t undermine.

What Jinshi could do at most, was only to react to those gazes as the target of their emotions.

“How kindly. Since they’re heading up the gallows anyways, you should just resolutely bring them down.”

A voice closed in with the sound of shuffling footsteps.
Basen and the retainers put themselves on guard.

Shishou, the fat, slow-moving man, had turned up. There was a hand cannon in his hands.

Jinshi looked at the man who was known as the Old Raccoon.

“What a very easy-going manner of speaking, Shishou.”

Jinshi took out a document from his breast pocket. The gist of what was written in the note that bore the emperor’s seal was the capture of the Shi Clan.

Shishou moved slowly as he set up the hand cannon.

“Has he gone senile?”

One of the retainers whispered.

Shishou wasn’t carrying flint. It seems he had deduced that there was no way he could use it.

Jinshi quickly tugged Basen and the other retainer’s hands. They were then crawling on the floor.

There was the sound of firing. The bullet rebounded off the wall and, unluckily, hit the leg of a clan member who had fallen over. His scream reverberated in the hall.

“How miserable. Haven’t you tried shooting at a beast before as well?”

Shishou said to the one who was screaming.

“Even though you were so tempted to try it on people as soon as possible. How disappointing.”

What an emotionless voice, Jinshi thought. Was it his imagination that he sounded like he was chanting his lines in monotone?

“Hm, is that all? If only I have a bit more time mm.”

Shishou said, and threw away the hand cannon he had brought over. Then he looked at Jinshi, and for an instant, his face eased.

What does he want to say?

He couldn’t press him.

Even if he did, this man wouldn't speak.

“GO!”

Basen laid down the order from the ground.

Blood sprayed.

Three swords ran through the plump Shishou's torso in quick succession.

Shishou didn't scream. He only looked up. Red foam leaked from his mouth, his eyes became bloodshot. However, he didn't fall and only spread out his large hands as he faced up.

Laughter, or was it a curse?

There was nothing in the ceiling, or was he looking further up?
Jinshi didn't know.

Without leaving behind an answer, Shishou let out his dying breath.

If you say it was too quick, it was too quick. His final moments were just like that.



There were lightly-dressed women and gaudy men in the corridor past the hall.

The women ran their mouths saying who was inside and begged for their lives. The men insisted that the women were members of the Shi Clan and they were not.

He knew the feeling of wanting to help them, but Jinshi turned his face away from the unsightly appearance of selling other people, and left their arrest to his retainers.

He was told the former high-ranked consort Rouran and her mother Shenmei was in the innermost room.

“Isn't there no one here?”

Basen entered the room before Jinshi did.

There was a single large bed and several couches lined up inside. Clothes tossed about, the wafting scent of incense, the overturned wine, and pipes. What kind of act was done here, he didn't need to see it to guess.

Jinshi, who was dizzy from the incense, found himself throwing away the incense burner.

Things that looked like dried herbs spilled out of the incense burner. If the pharmacist girl was here, she would be telling him what kind of use they had.

"Where did they go?"

There was no one in the connecting room or balcony either.

"Could they have jumped off outside?"

As everyone was going to the balcony, Jinshi turned his head.

The room he went into and the room next door, structure-wise, should be the same size, but he strangely felt it was out of sorts.

He sensed that the inner room was smaller. Jinshi walked through both rooms. The inner room only had one entrance, the opposite side facing the balcony was a wall. He could feel the space in proportion to the small number of furniture, but the distance from the wall to the balcony was somewhat, short.

Jinshi returned to the room he first entered and looked at the dresser that was placed against the wall. The width of the dresser was just the right size to the size difference to the room next door.

"..."

Jinshi opened the dresser. He reached through the rows of gaudy outfits. The dresser looked solid but the board at the back was strangely thin. He tried pressing it lightly, and noticed the backboard had shifted up.

Jinshi stepped into the dresser, crawling in on all fours and emerged his face inside. There was a space spread out where there should originally be a wall.

There was a hidden passageway.

And then, he could see a faint light.

“Baaang.”

He heard a playful voice.

There was a muzzle pointed right at his direction. Rouran was deeper inside the hidden passageway. The shape of the hand cannon was complex compared to the ones Jinshi knew. It resembled the hand cannon Shishou had fired some time ago, but this was a lot smaller than that – it could even be carried into a cramped space. Not just gunpowder, they even went as far as to produce new models. That was surprising.

“For convenience sake, I shall call you Jinshi-sama.”

Rouran said as she faced the muzzle at Jinshi.

The woman was covered in soot and her hair was singed. The candle flame in her hand wavered every time she spoke.

“Shall I have you follow me?”

“What if I refuse?”

“That’s why I’m threatening you.”

Jinshi felt it was even more refreshing with her dignified manner of speaking.

Jinshi looked at the new hand cannon model. He affirmed the parts were different structural-wise to the traditional models, so he raised both his hands.

“I understand.”

Saying only just that, he decided to follow Rouran.



The hidden passageway wasn’t drawn in the sketch Jinshi had looked at. There wouldn’t be a meaning for hidden if it was drawn in the sketch. Or perhaps, it could

have been something Shishou had newly constructed.

The passageway was narrow so Rouran was walking backwards with the muzzle pointed at Jinshi. It would be easier if Jinshi walked in front, but were he to pass over, she would have to be cautious about him taking the hand cannon off her.

“You truly are coming along obediently.”

“It was you who told me to come along though.”

Jinshi replied curtly, and Rouran giggled. Mysteriously, he thought that her expressions were more human compared to her time in the inner palace.

“Wouldn’t it be easy for you to steal this from me?”

“ ... ”

Not saying for certain, I can probably render her powerless, Jinshi thought.

He didn’t say that, and only just replied her with silence.

The candle flame started to go out as if the air in the narrow passageway was thin. And just as it was going to vanish, they reached the hidden room.

As if there was surely an air vent inside, the candle flame that he thought had disappeared flickered back to life.

Illuminated by the flickering flame, were two women aside from Rouran. One was a girl who greatly resembled Rouran. There was a black bruise on her face. *Would this be Shishou’s other daughter, Shisui?* Jinshi inferred.

Then he looked at the other middle-aged woman. *Gaudy outfit and gaudy make-up,* Jinshi thought. Her appearance, that was unbecoming of her age, reminded him of Rouran’s appearance when she was in the inner palace.

There were only two chairs and one table in the room.

“Rouran, this man is...”

“Yes, Mother. I had him come along to grant your wish.”

Rouran’s mother, Shenmei, raised the corner of her eyes forcefully and glared at Jinshi.

“You always hated his appearance, haven’t you? Was it because he looked like someone, or were you always jealous that he is more beautiful than you?”

“Rouran!”

Shenmei shouted at her daughter. However, Rouran wasn’t fazed. Instead, Shisui trembled.

“That joke went too far. Well then, shall we have one entertainment before Mother achieves her long-cherished ambition?”

Rouran set the candle on the table and slipped the hand cannon into the sash of her clothes.

And then, she began to tell the story in a clear voice.

CHAPTER 42

VILLAIN

Jinshi thought that Rouran's story was about what happened during the era of the previous emperor.

The dim-witted emperor had ruled as his mother's puppet – she was loftily making a fool of the previous emperor with her speech, though Jinshi couldn't get offended as he knew it to be the truth.

He never regarded the man said to be his sire to be frightening, rather, it was the man's mother who stood behind him that he feared.

Jinshi looked back to his past. He couldn't clearly remember the final moments of the woman who was known as the Empress. The only thing he could remember was how the previous emperor had passed away like he was chasing after her.

The Empress had grown impatient of her son who displayed no interest in women and had sent forth many beauties into the inner palace. And once, she had told the head of a certain clan in the north to send in his daughter. She had told him that she would officially appoint his daughter as her son's high-ranked consort.

“...what are you talking about, Rouran?”

Shenmei, her mother, asked about her daughter's incomprehensible sorry. It was a little different to the story she knew from long ago.

Rouran giggled behind her sleeve.

“Is this your first-time hearing this, Mother? Grandfather *had* cursed it out while in his sickbed.”

It wasn't historically unusual to have the daughters of high officials taken as hostages by making them consorts.

“Do you know why the inner palace became this large?”

Rouran asked Jinshi.

“I heard in a story that your father had prompted the Empress.”

That was the typical view of the imperial court. The man called Shishou had curried up to the famous empress who was known to be hard to please. The man was originally no more than a branch member of the Shi Clan, and it was due to his intelligence that he was adopted into the main family that was lacking an heir and received the name ‘Shishou’. Also, that main family was Shenmei’s family.

In other words, Shishou and Shenmei had been engaged before she was bestowed on him.

“Indeed. It seems he had proposed to have the inner palace expanded as a new public utility.”

Well put, Jinshi thought. The topic of reducing the size of the inner palace was avoided due to that.

“As a project that replaces the slave trade.”

Jinshi widened his eyes at Rouran’s words.
Shenmei, bewildered, also widened her eyes.
Shisui remained expressionless.

Rouran grinned at Jinshi. Then she looked at Shenmei.

“It looks like Mother doesn’t know anything. About what Grandfather did to have the empress have her eyes on him, and about why she got him to send his daughter to the inner palace to keep an eye on him.”

In those days, slavery was going strong. There were even government-owned slaves in the imperial court.
However, Rouran said *slave trade*.

The treatment of slaves in the country of Rii was basically the same as the prostitutes of the brothels. They work befitting their selling price, otherwise, there are cases where they can also change from lowly people to law-abiding citizens at the end of their term of service.

However, that was limited to within the country. It was prohibited to export slaves to foreign countries.

“It seems slaves were profitable. Even prohibited, there was no end to people who get involved in it. In particular, young girls sold high in those days.”

The Shi Clan, who had their daughter taken as a hostage, had been compelled to curtail the slave trade. Even so, he was told that they borrowed the place known as the inner palace for the drain of slaves that wouldn't go away. And it wasn't only young girls who entered, there were men as well. After all, there were not few who get castrated and sold off when they become slaves.

Shishou had proposed to have the inner palace as a place of temporary refuge, gathering young girls who were expected to be sold to foreign countries. It coincided with the Empress' motive. As the ruling administrator, and as a mother thinking of her son, it seems that she had seen it as a plan that killed two birds with one stone.

The parents who sold their daughters also felt guilt. If there was the choice of working as an inner palace court lady over being sold as a slave, they should choose the former. If they gain some skill or training in those two years of service, the chance of them falling to slavery afterward would also decrease. And best of all, serving in the inner palace in itself is treated as a form of privilege.

“Of course, just as the Empress didn't have a single motive, Father didn't only have just one consideration.”

That was to return trust to the Shi Clan by gaining the Empress' confidence, and the time when it was still impossible was—.

“Mother had suffered too. If it turned out this way, why didn't you escape in the first place? By using what Father had specially constructed for you.”

Was Rouran talking about the hidden passageway that she used to sneak out the inner palace?

Shenmei's face was clouded.

“Were you unable to trust the man who told you cast aside your position and run away?”

“Rouran, what are you...”

Shenmei looked at her daughter, the wrinkles on her face deep. It wasn't Rouran who was scared of her expression. It was Shisui.

As if Shenmei noticed that, she shifted her gaze towards Shisui, looking at her like she was seeing garbage.

“As if I could trust him. As if I could trust the man who succeeded the family headship as soon as Father died and married that woman's mother afterward!”

Shisui was trembling as she looked at Shenmei.

Rouran giggled as she approached Shisui. She took her half-sister's hand and touched her collar. She pulled out the thing that was hanging from her neck.

Hanging from a cord was a handcraft that greatly resembled Jinshi's silver *kanzashi*. Like how Jinshi's was shaped like a Kirin, Shisui's was shaped like a bird. A Phoenix¹ – people who knew of it would understand.

Just like the Kirin, the people who can wear the Phoenix on their body are limited.

“It looks like the previous emperor had feelings of guilt. He had been worried about the baby he had banished from the inner palace and frequently showed himself with Father's guidance.”

He was told that it was Shishou who had secretly sheltered the medical officer and baby who had been banished.

And when the baby grew up and reached marriageable age, Shishou succeeded the family headship.

“Though the previous emperor had denied it once, it looked like he knew that she was his daughter. It seemed it went like this-”

Can I marry your daughter, Shishou had asked.

For the emperor, Shishou, who had the Empress' deep confidence and treated him warmly, must have been the ideal son-in-law.

When Shishou pleaded that 'I'll grant any wish of yours', how could the emperor have rejected him?

The previous family head whom the Empress had her eyes on was in his sickbed, and the head of the Shi Clan had transferred to the deeply trusted Shishou.

The need to have Shenmei as a hostage wasn't as great as before.

Also, it was the emperor who had the greatest right to decide on what to do with the flowers of the inner palace. He had his daughter married. She birthed a child in the meantime. Her child was bestowed upon the name Shisui with the 'Shi' character. From that, the satisfied previous emperor finally gave the Flower of the Inner Palace to Shishou.

"And like so, Mother was bestowed."

The previous emperor was a foolish man. He didn't even know what kind of effect he gave his own daughter. After a short time, Shisui's mother died a *natural death*, and Shisui was taken in by the former medical officer of the inner palace.

About that time, the previous emperor reached the point where he was bedridden, and he left no instructions whatsoever in the ten-odd years later until he passed away. Shisui only had her name and a single silver handcraft, she had nothing besides those. She didn't even know who she was, the granddaughter of the previous emperor, only treated as the child of a concubine after Rouran was born.

"L-lies. Don't sprout nonsense!"

Shenmei shrank back from the reality that was thrust before her.

It should be a shocking story to Shisui as well, but she didn't look that shaken. She was only watching Shenmei uneasily. She might have known from the start.

"Nonsense, you say? Father had always come around for Mother. Even though he had done it for his final moments where there was nothing left but destruction?"

Rouran laughed as she approached her own mother.

"And so, do you also know the reason why Jinshi-sama is here?"

Rouran looked at her mother scornfully, then shifted her gaze to Jinshi.

“How were Father’s final moments?”

“...he went laughing.”

He hadn’t known what kind of meaning that laugh had. Jinshi hadn’t known Shishou’s motive at all.

However, having heard Rouran’s story, he could see a somewhat different perspective.

From the start, he even felt that he had thought wrong about the Shi Clan’s uprising.

“...that man, he only desired power. Even getting me married, that was surely only just a display of his seat as the clan head.”

Shenmei’s face contorted.

And in response, Rouran’s face eased.

“But, in the end, the one who exercised her authority in the clan more than Father, would have to be Mother, right? Does Mother know, what kind of people are the clan members who flatter Mother?”

The fools who repeatedly bribed and embezzled were the ones who buttered up to Shenmei. As long as Shenmei was pleased with it, the clan head Shishou wouldn’t say anything. After all, he was the man who entered as a son-in-law. Compared to his influence in the imperial court, he didn’t have that much power within his own clan.

Shenmei steadily drove out the ones who proposed things that troubled her. And as a consequence, the pus steadily accumulated.

From there, the miscalculation of her warped perception became apparent.

The expansion of the inner palace and the embezzlement of the national treasury. What kind of purpose did those two serve?

Rouran grinned, seeing Jinshi’s face. She must have realised what Jinshi wanted to say.

The slave trade was abolished when the current emperor came into power. Though it remained behind the scenes even now, it progressed relatively smoothly owing to the

inner palace project carried out by Shishou and the Empress.

Jinshi was still exploring for another project to take over with the downscale of the inner palace. Even concerning that point, there was an incident where it was obstructed with the connection to the Shi Clan.

“Father is a raccoon, though he is called a raccoon, raccoons are actually a cowardly creature. Precisely because he knew he was actually weak and small, he tried his best to delude his opponent.”

Tried to delude. Jinshi reached an understanding with those words.

About the reason Shishou had died laughing.

“Did Father properly finish playing the role of the villain?”

Rouran smiled faintly.

At her sentence, Jinshi finally understood Shishou’s motive.

He clenched his fist. His nails sank into his palm, drawing blood.

“Is there evidence that states that that is true?”

“It depends on you whether you believe there is evidence or not.”

“Is there evidence that will do the trick?”

“If it doesn’t do the trick, it would be better if the country takes it. If the country is going to fall from that, it would much better if there isn’t any.”

Rouran said in a tone that could even be heard as careless.

“W-were you always doing such a thing!”

Shenmei’s voice quivered.

“Have you always been deceiving me with that man!”

“What deceiving, I have just been doing as Mother says. Didn’t you say that this kind of country should just fall? You chased out the clan members who opposed you, and

encircled yourself with the morons who flatter you. Did you think you can win against the government forces with that disorderly crowd full of those kinds of guys?"

Shenmei raised her eyes at her daughter's cold words. She then sprang upon Rouran. She scratched her nail guard covered fingers on Rouran's cheeks, drawing two red lines.

"Didn't we have this made for that reason?"

In Shenmei's hand was the hand cannon she seized.

"This is too much for Mother's hands. Please give it back."

"Shut up!"

She hooked her finger on the trigger of the new model hand cannon. And pulled.

Jinshi dropped down.

With a booming sound, something splattered.

"I told Father that I would take responsibility, but it really was impossible for me."

There was blood on Rouran's face.

Before her, was Shenmei who was covered in pure red. In her hands were the remains of the hand cannon that had misfired.

"The structure of the new model is complex. Since it's a prototype."

She had carried it to threaten Jinshi from the start. Perhaps, it might have packing inside from the start.

"Didn't Jinshi-sama think of snatching this away? If you looked for a chance, you could've taken it many times."

"You must have wanted to tell me something."

"Fufu, it would truly be good if you are a fool with only looks to speak of."

Rouran, smiling as she said something rude, took the hand cannon from the blood covered Shenmei and flung it away. Then she laid the woman down slowly and grasped her trembling hand.

“Father is dead. Please shed one tear at least.”

“...”

Shenmei didn't speak, couldn't speak. Due to the misfire, the woman's face had a piece of shrapnel lodged into it. There was no shadow of the face that should have once been beautiful, it was just drenched in red.

Shisui only trembled as she looked at that appearance.

“Isn't there a different method?”

Jinshi asked Rouran who got to her feet.

“There might have been. But, it is difficult to grant everything everyone wanted to do. We are not that smart.”

Shenmei had only loathed. She had wanted to overthrow the country that continued to make a fool of her.

Shishou had always worked for Shenmei's sake. Even if it was going to backfire, he was thinking about her. And, at the same time, he was the loyal subject who was unable to abandon his country. To the point of continuing to act for several decades as the villain for their sakes.

Jinshi didn't know what Shisui was thinking. Only that, was it his imagination that he could see relief reflected in her hollow eyes when she looked at the feebly breathing Shenmei.

And lastly, speaking of Rouran—.

“It seems extravagant, but can I ask you *two* requests?”

“What is it?”

“Thank you.”

As if she understood that she originally wouldn't get him to listen, Rouran bowed her head deeply.

Then she took out some paper from her bosom. She handed that to Jinshi.

Jinshi looked over that. Something unexpected to Jinshi was written on it.

“!?”

“This is merely an empty theory at the utmost, but I think this will be useful. For the probability of this happening in a couple of years hereafter is high.”

Rouran stroked her own mother. Shenmei's breaths were on the verge of dying out.

“The one who had upright thoughts in the clan had already discarded their name. My older sister is also the same. Can you overlook the ones who have died *once*?”

“...I'll try.”

“Well then, you'll overlook the ones who have died once, right?”

Rouran said like she was making sure.

Shisui, as long as she had ties to the previous emperor, he couldn't flatly refuse.

“Thank you.”

Rouran bowed her head again, and then she took Shenmei's hand. The twisted nail guards were barely on her crushed fingers.

Rouran wore that on her own fingers.

At the same time, Jinshi sensed a presence.

They must have finally noticed the hidden passage. Had Rouran realised it?

“Well then, the one other request-”

Rouran extended her hand towards Jinshi. She extended her hand that had the long

nail decorations.

It looked like Rouran moved slowly.

He could have avoided it if he thought of doing so. However, he didn't move, and took it.

The tips of the twisted nail guards sank into Jinshi's cheek. It sliced into his skin and flesh.

He saw blood flying. Jinshi looked at Rouran with one eye closed.

"Thank you."

Rouran thanked him for the third time.

"Have I become an actress like Father too?"

Rouran, saying it in a joking tone, looked at Shenmei.

"Mother, this is the best I could do."

With a smile, Rouran opened the door.

As expected, in the narrow passage, Basen and the other had been there peeking through the gap.

Rouran, confirming that, raised the nails on her fingers up high. Even in the dim lighting, they could see that there was blood on it.

And behind her was Jinshi with an injury on his face.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!"

Rouran suddenly laughed.

Her voice echoed loudly down the narrow passageway.

Basen and the other's expression changed to anger.

There was no longer any light in Shenmei's eyes.

Shisui reached out as she trembled, but she couldn't get to Rouran.

Jinshi could only oversee her final moments as he clutched the document she had handed over to him.



A determined body was heavy.

It seems all his fatigue from this past couple of days had finally caught up with him.

As soon as he left the fortress, they had adjoined with the late arriving unit, and the medical officer stitched his face. It was Jinshi who was getting stitched up, so he couldn't understand why the people around him were making pained faces.

The one who told him to sleep immediately was Gaoshun who finally adjoined. Since it was decided that Jinshi was in the late arriving unit, Gaoshun naturally was obliged to stay behind.

Speaking of that, he finally realised that he hadn't slept properly for this past couple of days.

"How is that girl?"

"She's fine so please sleep."

Am I making such a sleepy face, Jinshi thought, but he didn't feel like doing that. As if he lost patience to Jinshi who wasn't listening to him, Gaoshun secretly pointed to the horse carriage in the interior.

"I believe it's better if you don't get too close."

Ignoring Gaoshun's words, he entered the horse carriage, and lying inside was a thin girl covered in soot with blood stains in several places.

She was sleeping on top of several layers of furs. Her sleeping form, curled like a baby, made her look smaller than usual.

There were somethings bundled in white cloths around her.

"Those are the dead Shi Clan children."

“Why, is she sleeping in such a place?”

“Even if you ask her why, it’s not like she would say anything.”

This girl, Maomao had a strangely stubborn side of her.
Does she have something she was expecting?

“She looks, considerably awful.”

“You too.”

With a bitter look, Gaoshun looked at Jinshi. His heart pained, recalling how as soon as he returned, Gaoshun had sent Basen flying.

“I’m good. At any rate, not letting the Tactician see her was the correct answer.”

According to the story, he was told that after forcibly setting out to march, the man was stopped by everyone, and yet, as he tried to leave when he saw the chance, he overexerted himself and strained his back. It seems he was in the condition where he couldn’t move an inch.

Jinshi went up the horse carriage.

“Wait outside.”

Gaoshun nodded slowly, not going up.

Jinshi studied Maomao’s face. There was blood on her face that still had rashes. There was a small triangular notch on her left ear, which was thickly smeared with ointment.

If Maomao didn’t have anything to do with Jinshi, she might not have to go through this kind of thing. When he thought that, his heart pained.

Aside from her ear, there didn’t seem to be any injury on her face. Though, he could see a red line on her neck.

Could that be a knife wound?

Jinshi slowly extended his hand.

And then—.

“What are you doing, Jinshi-sama?”

Maomao was looking at him like she was infuriatingly chasing away a fly.

CHAPTER 43

BREATH

When she woke up, there was a beautiful noble before her. For some reason, he was leaning over Maomao with his hand on her collar.

“Th-this is-”

Maomao narrowed her eyes back at him and Jinshi waved his hands about, speaking in a panicky tone. Normally, she would glare at him for a bit longer, but she noticed that Jinshi’s face was bandaged.

“...Jinshi-sama, what happened?”

Maomao said as she fixed her collar.

“Nothing big. It’s just a scratch.”

He hid it behind his hand.

Maomao frowned.

“Please show me.”

“There’s nothing to see.”

It was concerning that he was playing it like this. She inched closer to Jinshi. And Jinshi drew back.

She drove him to the wall, and slowly reached her hand out.

“...”

There was a cut that ran diagonally along the left cheek of his face that must be called his greatest asset. The cut went through flesh, not just skin. It had been stitched with thread.

It was treated properly, but it must leave a permanent scar.

“Did you go out to the front lines?”

“It’s not like I alone can watch from a safe place.”

“Wouldn’t it have been fine if you just watched? You have that position after all.”

Maomao said slightly exasperatedly.

“Please don’t go right ahead to dangerous places. It will inconvenience everyone if Jinshi-sama gets hurt.”

Jinshi scratched his head, smiling bitterly at Maomao’s words.

“Yeah, I did something inexcusable to Basen. You mightn’t think so, but Gaoshun’s fists are quite effective.”

He said, and he started to clumsily rebandage his face. Maomao snatched the bandage away from him and wrapped it for him.

“I didn’t plan on getting hurt though.”

“Anyone would say the same.”

“It’s because I heard a strange request.”

Jinshi lowered his lashes. Gloominess brimmed in his obsidian eyes.

“...were you, close to Rouran?”

Jinshi suddenly asked Maomao.

“Relatively.”

“Were you friends?”

“I have no idea.”

She really had no idea.

She thought that they probably had a close relationship. That was what Maomao felt,

at least. Though she had no idea about the other person.

“She was a person who was really hard to understand.”

“...for me too.”

Jinshi’s expression became even more aggrieved.

“She was finished while I knew nothing.”

It wasn’t Maomao who didn’t understand the meaning of those words.

“Is that so?”

It was something she understood. That time, when she left the room, Rouran had entrusted Maomao with a certain thing. And then she made her resolution and left.

What she left Maomao to do, the only thing she entrusted her to accomplish was—.

“Jinshi-sama, how about you rest?”

“Yeah, I’m so sleepy.”

Jinshi’s complexion was bad. It was likely his condition was much worse than Maomao who had been held captive. She could see faint bags under his eyes and his lips were dry.

He should have quickly returned to his own horse carriage to sleep, but Jinshi – of all things – laid down on the furs that Maomao had been sleeping on. Maomao’s face blatantly contorted.

“Jinshi-sama, please don’t sleep here.”

“Why? I’m tired.”

“Even if you ask *why*.”

Maomao looked around. There were five bundles in the horse carriage. Those were the children of the Shi Clan.

“This is a taboo place.”

“...I know that.”

“Then—”

He grabbed and pulled her wrist before she could finish speaking. His hand was very cold.

They were now facing each other atop the pile of furs.

“Then, why are you here?”

“Even I don’t have the heart to pity children.”

It was a speech she had prepared beforehand.

“I wonder if that’s really true. I find that slightly mysterious.”

Jinshi, who was lying on his side, tilted his head slightly.

“Didn’t you say that doctors can’t touch dead bodies?”

(He remembered!)

Maomao subconsciously scowled.

“I don’t think that *you* would stay in this kind of place for a long time.”

His intuition worked in strange places.

Maomao worked her brain, thinking how she could escape the pair of eyes that were watching her intently.

While she was frozen like that, Jinshi reached out. He grabbed hold of Maomao’s collar and wrenched it open.

“And what is it that happened to *you*?”

Jinshi knitted his brows and said.

There was a red knife cut that ran across her bared skin. There were also bite marks on her shoulders and neck, but what would happen if he saw that?

Maomao felt a little shy, but she decided to proceed with it indifferently.

“There were good for nothing guys.”

“...were you assaulted?”

She heard a cold voice.

“It was attempted.”

She made sure to add.

This man intrudes on other people’s chastity in detail.

“I turned the tables on them. I was able to render their function as men unusable for a short while.”

She had stepped and crushed them, but they shouldn’t be ruptured.

Hearing that, Jinshi’s face turned blue.

“No, I know they’re reaping what they sowed, I know but-“

There must be some parts that he understood, being the same gender. Jinshi’s face was bitter. And with that bitter face, he reached out.

He traced a finger down her wound and she involuntarily twitched.

“It won’t leave a scar, right?”

“The cut is only a skin deep.”

Feeling uncomfortable from the sensation of his finger, she drew back, but accordingly, Jinshi reached out with his hand. Maomao, unable to bear with that, sat up and fixed her collar.

“Don’t leave a scar.”

“Shall I return those words back at you as well?”

Jinshi smiled broadly at Maomao’s words.

“I’m a man. No problem.”

“Jinshi-sama has excelled in that.”

“As if I know about that.”

“Then I don’t know. If you become worthless from a single scar, then we’ll leave it at that.”

“Aren’t you speaking harshly to me just then?”

Jinshi didn’t release Maomao’s wrist as he lay down. His hands, which had been strangely cold until a moment ago, were now a little warmer.

“Am I, a man who becomes worthless from a single scar?”

Jinshi asked, his grip on Maomao’s wrist tightening.

“A doll with only looks?”

At his question, Maomao naturally shook her head.

“Actually, it might be better if you have a bit more scars.”

She unintendedly revealed her true thoughts.

Jinshi is too beautiful. Everyone is thrown into disarray just by seeing him. Everyone looks too much into his appearance. His essence isn’t as majestic as his appearance, it is more honest, Maomao thought.

And the only ones that know that are the very few people around him.

Maomao sighed deeply and broke into a faint smile.

“Haven’t you become manlier than you were before?”

That moment, she realised that Jinshi had clammed his lips shut. He looked around restlessly, then shook his head, closing and opening his eyes.

“What is wrong?”

Maomao asked. Jinshi scratched the back of his head with his free hand.

“...due to the situation around us, I had thought of enduring with it.”

“Enduring with it, is it? If you’re sleepy, then please hurry up and...”

She was going to chase him out by telling him to please hurry up and leave here to sleep.

However, as she was wondering if he was enduring with his sleepiness, he tugged her wrist once again.

She now sat facing Jinshi. He was holding down her upper arms.

“When I saw your injury just then, I had planned to go with it calmly.”

With an uneasy face, he inched over little by little towards Maomao. His warm breath fell over Maomao’s face.

“It seemed to have gone unexpectantly, or perhaps I should say, better than I thought.”

“Hah?”

Jinshi’s face slowly closed in. It was the moment when their noses were about to touch.

There was a clunk.

Jinshi leapt up in surprise.

The sound came from where the children had been laid down.

“!?”

Maomao pushed Jinshi aside, and went towards the sound.
One by one, she took the wrists of the bundled children.

(No, no.)

It was when Maomao touched the third child.

“...—”

The child’s small mouth moved weakly.

His pulse, though soft, was beating.

‘If these children are insects, they will overcome the winter.’

She recalled Rouran’s words.

The females of the insect that cries with the sound of bells also die themselves after eating the males. Only the offspring overcome the winter and survive.

Rouran had likened her own clan to insects.

Also, Rouran had provided Maomao one other clue.

Devil’s Trumpet. It is both a poison and a medicine. The thing on the paper that had been shown and given to Maomao.

At times, it is used as a medicine of the secret art in foreign countries.

As a medicine that kills a person once and revives them again.

She recalled the former medical officer who had been confined by Shenmei and forced to make the elixir of life. Though it wasn’t immortality, had he researched a medicine that was still somewhat similar? There were sheets of written notes slipped inside the books the former medical officer had used. Among those, there had been fish fins. Fugu fins.

It uses poisons that kill people once. However, mixing several of these poisons will

offset each other and get neutralised. She was told that once the poisons become neutralised, the person who had died once will be revived.

“Are they alive?”

Jinshi was behind her.

However, Maomao didn't have the leisure to care about that. She rubbed the children's' bodies. It was important for their resuscitation to be successful by any means possible.

It was for this reason that Rouran had brought Maomao here.

Jinshi had no idea what to do with the revived children. But, he didn't have the leisure to have that excuse.

“Jinshi-sama, hot water, please prepare hot water. And something warm! Clothes, food, anything.”

“...those who have died once, is it?”

Jinshi chuckled.

“She got me.”

“Jinshi-sama!”

Whatever he was muttering about was nothing of concern to Maomao. She shouted, raising her eyes.

“Yeah, I get it.”

She felt that Jinshi had said it in a somewhat cheerful voice. His expression looked more eased than before, but yet, he looked a little disappointed.

Maomao frantically resuscitated the children, somehow or other trying to revive the children one after the other. Jinshi brought in blankets and a pail, and when he left, he whispered into her ear.

“Shall we continue this another time?”

“Aah, yeah sure.”

The busy Maomao didn't think deeply, replying with just that, and then immersed herself into looking after the children.

EPILOGUE

PHARMACIST OF THE PROSTITUTION QUARTER

It got busy after that.

There was nothing from Jinshi. He didn't tell her to leave the children be, nor that there was no point in doing so. He didn't immediately send them to the execution grounds either.

Maomao had no idea, but it was a blessing for her.

She became desperate resuscitating the children. She was grateful that she was permitted to stay in a village along the way without returning to the capital like this. Though it was out of use nowadays, the village once prospered as a health resort, so it was the ideal place for recuperation.

Since she had made such a racket for hot water or something, and moreover, it was Jinshi who had prepared it for her, everyone wouldn't think it wasn't strange. People gathered around the carriage with a bustle.

With Gaoshun's quick decision, it was decided that Maomao's condition had gotten worse, but that became chaotic in its own way. As the monocle tactician with the strained back had turned up creeping on the floor like a wraith.

Afterwards, the weirdo tactician being bundled up in a *futon* by Rahan and several subordinates, forced to drink a sleeping-draught, and then forced to ride the fastest carriage back to the capital was a truth that sounded like a lie.

They must be fearing for the payback after, but Rahan would somehow get away with it, Maomao thought. She pretty much also knew about that man's adopted son. This guy is considerably cunning despite his appearance.

Taking the opportunity with another request, she had Suirei come along with her. Basen also accompanied them as supervision, and together they stayed in the village. One of Basen's cheeks were largely swollen and he was frowning more than usual, but she was thankful that he worked he was told. She felt that the number of guards was excessive, but she figured that more hands were appreciated.

Suirei was out of energy, merely watching as Maomao warmed up the children. Maomao got angry and beat the daylight out of Suirei's face.

Medicine isn't omnipotent. It is difficult to determine the right amount of poison for children with small bodies to drink. As a result, the last one didn't wake up at all. Not waking up meant death.

"In any case, this must be what you compounded? Are you going to casually say that a doctor failed even as a joke?"

Basen came in to cover up for the terrified Suirei who had her hands on her cheeks. Although Suirei was of the Shi Clan, her living signified her noble lineage. And this person was beaten up by Maomao.

"Oi. How dare you!"

"Please don't butt in! Leaving that aside, hot water! And a brazier!"

It looked like Shenmei had bullied her stepchild, but that didn't concern Maomao. Maomao didn't have a gentle personality that went as far as to have deep empathy for the misfortunes of others.

In truth, there was no doubt that Rouran had wanted to leave this job to her older sister. But the current Suirei was like a husk. She won't be useful like this. Anticipating that, she must have brought Maomao along as a backup.

"I ended up coming to this place because of you. Hold some responsibility for your own doings at least."

Suirei made a jolt of surprise, but then she started to move unsteadily. She went to children who had yet to wake and examined their eyes and looked inside their mouths.

All the while, Maomao looked after the child who was still in a dangerous condition.



After everything was said and done, all five children were revived.

Maybe because they were in a state of apparent death for a long time, the children were docile at first, and it was after a couple of days when their consciousness cleared up.

The children who woke up first asked where their mother was, but the child who woke last remained distracted.

Nonetheless, he ate his meals properly and answered back clearly. Maomao treated that child in a different room.

Suirei was a reliable imperial court lady from the start so she worked the hardest. Though Basen stood watch over her so that she won't get any strange ideas, she looked fine for now. At least, she looked fine while she was looking after the children.

Thanks to that, Maomao could take her time soaking in the hot spring for as much as Suirei tried her best. *Don't bludge*, Basen had told her but that had nothing to do with her.

Half a month passed like so, and their pick-up from the capital came.

For a moment she thought the person who had come was Jinshi, but that was wrong. Shorter and a face devoid of wounds, the person who had looks that were more dignified than graceful was someone Maomao knew.

"Ah Duo-sama."

The former high-ranked consort had turned up at the declined health resort disguised as a man. The village girls and aunties looked at Ah Duo with cloudy eyes. No one must have realised she is female.

"He's a little busy. So I've come on behalf of him."

Saying that, Ah Duo beamed as she looked at Maomao and the others.



“Oi, Freckles, I wanna eat dim sum.”

The boy, whose voice hasn’t broken, opened the door and came in. His name is Chou’u. His looks were good, but he looked foolish with his two front teeth fallen out.

The naughtiness has set in his demeanour, but it was only a couple of days ago when he finally moved about energetically.

Until then, he was just distracted and sleeping. Was the fact that he was moving about because of his youth or his good fortune?

The child who was made to drink poison and didn’t wake up until the end, that is Chou’u.

The children who would have originally gone up to the gallows with their parents were given different names. The other four children went with Ah Dou, and only Chou’u is in the prostitution quarter.

Luckily or unluckily, Chou’u lost his memories. Also, considering how half of his body remained lightly numb, she could honestly only think that his fortune was good.

To the point of thinking that he wouldn’t wake up in the worst-case scenario.

Though she had struck her, Suirei is outstanding as a doctor. Maomao considered wanting to call her to teach her as well. The woman is staying at Ah Duo’s place along with the other four children.

She was told that the children, who were kept alive for no known reason, were going to be brought up at Ah Duo’s place hereafter. There was talk that splitting them up would be better, but it seems Ah Duo said that was a bit much and took them under her wing.

And Suirei as well—.

Saying that with his memories lost, it was better for him to be raised away from the other children. And so, Chou’u came here.

There seemed to be various complaints and such, but that had nothing to do with Maomao. It shouldn't have anything to do with her, but why was this brat who cannot be helped here? In a certain meaning, she was told that it was the safest here, but she had no idea what was safe.

Maomao dropped her fist on the crown of the brat's head who was wilfully rummaging through the medicine shelf.

"Ow—!! What was that for?"

"Don't just eat as you please."

Maomao snatched away the package of high-class rice crackers she received from her older sister and threw over the brown sugar pieces that were on the same shelf at the boy.

Chou'u seemed to be satisfied with that and left the pharmacy while munching on the brown sugar. A good-natured manservant played with him, so he must be going there.

It was truly the saying that children have high adaptability. Rather than being uncertain from his lack of memories, as he was loved by the pretty older sisters and the manservant played with him, it seems he didn't have that much discontent at present. The madam seems to be chuckling to herself over her purse, so her eyes won't be rising up for a while.

Maomao slovenly rolled on the bed while crunching on salty rice crackers. She folded two rumpled *zabuton*, placed it under her head and faced up.

It was decided that Ruomen, her dad, won't be returning to the prostitution quarter and will serve in the imperial court. There wouldn't be anyone who could decline a personal request from the emperor.

Consort Gyokuyou gave birth safely.

She was told that a red-haired boy was born. Normally, there would be fanfare for celebration, but since the inner palace wasn't a place for this to happen, Consort Gyokuyou quietly slipped out of the inner palace. A consort going outside the inner palace meant that she became an empress¹. It was like that in other words.

(I have to go gather ingredients for medicine.)

Before her dad left the prostitution quarter, it seems he had made and stored a lot of medicine, but that sort of thing was obviously already gone. The plot must also be overgrown.

Maomao had a lot of things to do in the prostitution quarter.

At least, more than in the imperial court.

She hadn't met up with Jinshi since then. He wasn't someone she could meet if she thought of meeting.

There was no way that the man who took command of the army and sustained a wound on his face can return to the inner palace as a eunuch.

He must have returned to his former, his original appearance.

For the treatment of his wound, even if there was no Maomao, there were many outstanding medical officers, even her dad was there. Surely, even if Maomao was there, there would be nothing she could do.

It would be impossible for Jinshi who is no longer a eunuch to have a suspicious, skinny girl close at hand. There was no need to sneak around from now on as well.

And so, it was best that she returned to being a pharmacist in the prostitution quarter.

The madam couldn't be thinking again of selling her off if her dad wasn't around.

(Ahh, I'm sleepy.)

She had stayed up the whole night yesterday making medicine. It is difficult to make new medicine. You can sometimes produce toxicity when you try to improve the efficacy by compounding it multiple times.

She had inflicted wounds on her left arm and tried many varieties, but she really can't get the efficacy.

Since she was at it, she had tried smearing it on her ear injury, but she still didn't know. Was it because of the long years of accumulation? Her sense of pain seems to have dulled.

(Do I really have to cut more to know?)

Maomao looked at her left hand and tightly tied up her pinky with a cord. Then she got up and grabbed a small knife from the drawer of the cupboard.

(Alill right)

The moment she was going to bring the small knife down,

“What are you doing?”

She heard a beautiful voice behind her.

“...”

She turned back. There was a man wearing a strange mask at the doorway. Behind him stood a familiar worldly-wise man in his prime and the madam who was rubbing her hands together with an insincere smile.

“Are you finished with work?”

Maomao untied the cord around her finger and returned the small knife to the shelf.

“Can’t I have a break once in a while?”

The madam gently served tea, gave a satisfied smile and said, “Take your time”. The tea was first class white tea, and the snacks were *rakugan*². They were high-class items that were only brought out to the guests of the Three Princesses.

“Is this place fine?”

For some reason, the hag was asking Gaoshun about that. Since he nodded, she made a look of slight regret. “Take your time,” she closed the door.

(What does he want to do?)

First thing, Jinshi finally took off the mask. The face that could certainly be called his most valuable asset – if you exclude the scar running across it – was revealed.

Maomao pat down the doubled *zabuton* and set it before Jinshi. He flumped down on

it.

“You seem tired.”

Maomao set the tea and tea cakes before Jinshi.

Jinshi brought the teacup to his lips first.

“There were a variety of things. Human affairs were originally under the Shi Clan’s jurisdiction.”

He let out a tremendous sigh and his brows knitted. Was it her imagination that she thought his actions resembled Gaoshun somehow?

She heard the people of the Shi Clan were finally executed. The lot had been those who were in the fortress.

Their territory became the jurisdiction of the country. The land of the north was abundant in forestry resources, so the national treasury must be profiting hereafter. There would be plenty of change leftover even if they lowered the tax that was taken during the time of the clan.

If there was lumber, it can be used for various things.

(I’ll be happy if they use it for paper.)

Since there were abundant forestry recourses, she would be happy if the papermaking industry could advance. Were they to do so, the quality of paper should rise and the price should decrease.

While thinking that it must be the Shi Clan’s intervention that the industry did not advance until now, she had crushed medicine with the mortar before she knew it.

“...oi, don’t treat me like I’m invisible.”

“Sorry. Habit.”

“Whatever.”

Jinshi munched on the cookies and drank down the tea. When she saw that his teacup

was empty, Maomao was going to get up to serve tea when he grabbed her wrist.

“What is it?”

Jinshi tugged Maomao back down to sit. He stared at the side of her face.

“Can this not be healed?”

“There are no issues with function.”

Jinshi stared at Maomao’s ear. Her ear had a triangular notch on it.

(Don’t have a sweet smell.)

It wasn’t the fragrance of confectionary, but incense. *Suiren’s taste is good as usual*, she thought as she recalled the slightly mean, ageing maid.

It was that moment.

Jinshi’s face closed in. There was an uncomfortable feeling on her ear.

“...what are you doing?”

Something lukewarm-ish, warm-ish touched, no, wrapped around her ear.

“...it seems that there are townspeople that say that if you put saliva on it, it’ll heal or something.”

“I can’t say anything, but there are cases where human saliva has toxins.”

Just like how a wound could fester if you don’t disinfect it properly after getting bitten by a beast, there are also cases when it happens if you get bit by a person.

“Some poisons don’t really have an effect on you, right?”

Normally she would be shuddering and would want to edge away, but it was a little different today.

“It might even become medicine on the contrary.”

He said, taking out a package from his breast pocket and placing it on Maomao's lap.

When Maomao opened it, her eyes shone. Something that looked like yellow clay was there.

"Bezoar!!"

The exact moment Maomao fell forward, he embraced her tightly. Because of that, it was difficult for her outstretched hands to reach for the bezoar.

"First we continue where we left off."

Saying that, Jinshi smiled in delight.

Jinshi's wound she saw from the front was still in stitches. Perhaps it had been redone, the sutures were neater than before.

(Did dad resew it?)

When she was thinking that, she found herself reaching over to Jinshi's face. Jinshi squinted and made a somewhat innocent expression.

"Are you accumulating poison too?"

It was the moment when he said that and reached over to Maomao's chin.

"Freckles!"

There was a loud bang.

The window on the opposite side of the door, where money and medicine were handed over to customers, was widely opened.

"Look-! You, wanted this, right!"

Ahem! Chou'u was there, his chest puffed. He was holding up a large lizard with his right hand.

"Oh, you did it."

Maomao slipped through Jinshi, who suddenly dropped his head, and seized the lizard. She put that as it is into a jar.

“Huh? That dude, why is he crawling on the floor?”

“He’s tired because of work. Here, your reward.”

Maomao passed over another piece of brown sugar. Chou’u ran away again to parts unknown.

“...I should have sent him to the gallows.”

There was a deep groaning voice. He was just like a stray dog.

Was it because of the injury? She felt that Jinshi’s androgynous air was a tad fainter and he was bolder now.

There was a small crack in the doorway when she looked at it properly. And she saw eyeballs.

Maomao flung it open, and discovered the madam and Gaoshun who had jumped back in surprise.

“Gran, prepare a single bed. And the incense is the one that makes you sleep well.”

“Fiiinne.”

The madam clicked her tongue in disappointment and started to prepare the bed.

Maomao looked Jinshi who was crawling on the floor.

“Thank you very much, Jinshi-sama.”

With the bezoar in hand, she spontaneously broke into a wide smile.

Jinshi looked at Maomao in a daze.

“Please take your time resting.”

“I get it. I’ll rest.”

(This way is better.)

However, Jinshi made no signs of moving.

“Jinshi-sama.”

She kneeled down and Jinshi’s shoulders shook.

(That reminds me. Is it fine if I keep calling him Jinshi?)

When she thought about that—.

“I’ll use this as the pillow.”

Maomao was sitting in a seiza. Jinshi planted his head on her lap.

He wrapped his arms around her back so the crown of his head was resting against her belly.

“Jinshi-sama.”

“...”

He was silent. She didn’t know if he was feigning sleep or something.

The madam slipped in the high-class quilt and incense in the corner of the room and left.

Maomao sighed deeply and reached for the mortar.

As the aroma of incense intermingled with the stench of ground medicine, she heard the sound of Jinshi sleeping.

(My legs are going numb.)

While thinking that, Maomao started to make new medicine.

T/N: And so they lived happily ever aft— hell no. Jinshi-sama still has years of cockblock ahead of him (probably, since Maomao is adamant about keeping the status quo...) Poor Jinshi-sama. Slow steps, dude, you're getting there.

So, the manga won't be catching up anytime soon and my eyes literally glazed over when I tried to start on the next chapter...

...time to take a break. Since there is a one month time skip for the next arc, one month (thereabouts) it shall be ;D

See you guys then! As usual, thanks for reading :3

I'm gonna take it easy next arc. I'm about near burnt out from this arc, and I feel my translation quality has been slipping for a bit lately, so apologies for that.

btw, is there a way to differentiate the two different phases of locusts? Locust and swarming locust? Is there a more elegant way of phrasing the latter?

Also, shall I make some vocabulary changes for next arc? It doesn't really change anything, just makes it sound nicer is all... e.g.:

Prostitute > Courtesan

Medical Officer > Imperial Physician

1. 后, kasaki. The emperor's wife. Different to the Empress (女帝, jotei, female sovereign) that was the previous emperor's mother.
2. 落雁, a hard candy derived from Ming Dynasty China. Made from a mixture of starch powder and sugar, and pressed into shapes with red bean, chestnut etc in the center.



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